

Solid waste remains P.R.'s No. 1 environmental concern

Waste-to-energy plants vital for solving solid-waste crisis and to meet local energy needs

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Solid waste is still the island's No. 1 environmental problem, said Alan J. Steinberg during an exclusive interview with CARIBBEAN BUSINESS before stepping down from his post as Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) region administrator (RA).

Under the Bush administration, Steinberg was in charge of overseeing environmental issues in Puerto Rico, New York, New Jersey and the U.S. Virgin Islands. Since Jan. 20, Lisa Jackson has occupied this position.

"During his tenure, [former] President George W. Bush said the EPA's mission was 'to accelerate the pace of environmental protection while maintaining the nation's economic competitiveness.' Following this guideline, I'd say we had landmark successes under his administration," Steinberg declared.

In Puerto Rico, landfills were a priority. Locally, Steinberg said, "gaining control over repeated, ongoing solid-waste violations" was his greatest achievement. "The state of solid waste in the Commonwealth was a real threat to ground and water resources," he added.

When Steinberg first addressed the solid-waste crisis in Puerto Rico, 29 of the existing 32 landfills were out of compliance. Therefore, the



"Waste to energy not only helps resolve the island's solid-waste crisis, but represents a vital opportunity to meet its energy needs," said Alan J. Steinberg, exiting EPA Region 2 administrator.

EPA ordered the closing of 25 of them by 2030, leaving only seven to serve the entire island. The first five set to close are in Florida, Aguadilla, Toa Baja, Vega Baja and Santa Isabel.

"As a result of this course, we advocated for waste-to-energy (WTE) plants and received a significant, positive response. WTE not only helps resolve the island's solid-waste crisis, but represents a vital opportunity to meet its energy needs," Steinberg said.

Gov. Luis Fortuño has been a major supporter

of the EPA's efforts in Puerto Rico regarding landfill closings and the creation of WTE plants, according to Steinberg. "Fortuño is one of the finest people I've met over the years. He's dedicated to the enhancement of the environment and producing clean and safe energy; WTE goes toward attaining both these goals," he said.

Working in collaboration with the Puerto Rico Aqueduct & Sewer Authority (Prasa) to improve wastewater facilities and the quality of drinking water were also milestones achieved during Steinberg's administration.

"I was privileged to have worked on the final mega-consent order. Prasa has made tremendous progress. What's more, Puerto Rico has become a model of good corporate citizenship through technology and financing processes Prasa applied," Steinberg said. "In my opinion, water infrastructure is key for the future, more so than global warming."

Other achievements during Steinberg's tenure include improving water quality in New York as well as dredging the Hudson River, and works in Lake Onondaga, part of a Native American nation in New York.

"Working as the RA for EPA is the best job I've ever had and it certainly saddens me to leave the office. One of the best things about it was the power I had to make positive changes every day," Steinberg said. ■