

October 21, 1994

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Classification of Emissions from Landfills for
NSR Applicability Purposes

FROM: John S. Seitz, Director
Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards (MD-10)

TO: Director, Air, Pesticides and Toxics
Management Division, Regions I and IV
Director, Air and Waste Management Division,
Region II
Director, Air, Radiation and Toxics Division,
Region III
Director, Air and Radiation Division,
Region V
Director, Air, Pesticides and Toxics Division,
Region VI
Director, Air and Toxics Division,
Regions VII, VIII, IX and X

The EPA has recently received several inquiries regarding the treatment of emissions from landfills for purposes of major NSR applicability. The specific issue raised is whether the Agency still considers landfill gas emissions which are not collected to be fugitive for NSR applicability purposes.

The EPA's NSR regulations define "fugitive emissions" to mean "those emissions which could not reasonably pass through a stack, chimney, vent, or other functionally-equivalent opening" (40 CFR 51.165(a)(1)(x)). In general, where a facility is not subject to national standards requiring collection, the technical question of whether the emissions at a particular site could "reasonably pass through a stack, chimney, vent, or other functionally-equivalent opening" is a factual determination to be made by the permitting authority, on a case-by-case basis.

In determining whether emissions could reasonably be collected (or if any emissions source could reasonably pass through a stack, etc.), "reasonableness" should be construed broadly. The existence of collection technology in use by other sources in the source category creates a presumption that collection is reasonable. Furthermore, in certain circumstances, the collection of emissions from a specific pollutant emitting activity can create a presumption that collection is reasonable for a similar pollutant-emitting activity, even if that activity is located within a different source category.

In 1987, EPA addressed whether landfill gas emissions should be considered as fugitive.¹ The Agency explained that for landfills constructed or proposed to be constructed with gas collection systems, the collected landfill gas would not qualify as fugitive. Also, the Agency understood at the time that, with some exceptions, landfills were not constructed with such gas collection systems. The EPA explained that "[t]he preamble to the 1980 NSR regulations characterizes nonfugitive emissions as emissions which would ordinarily be collected and discharged through stacks or other functionally equivalent openings" (see 45 FR 52693, Aug. 7, 1980).² Based on the "understanding that landfills are not ordinarily constructed with gas collection systems," the Agency concluded that "emissions from existing or proposed landfills without gas collection systems are to be considered fugitive emissions." The Agency also made clear, however, that the applicant's decision on whether to collect emissions is not the deciding factor. Rather, it is the reviewing authority that makes the decision regarding which emissions can reasonably be collected and therefore not considered fugitive.

The EPA believes its 1987 interpretation of the 1980 preamble may have been misunderstood, and in any case that its factual conclusions at that time are now outdated. Continued misunderstanding or application of this outdated view could discourage those constructing new landfills from utilizing otherwise environmentally- or economically-desirable gas collection and mitigation measures in order to avoid major NSR applicability.

¹See memorandum entitled "Emissions from Landfills," from Gerald A. Emison, Director, Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, to David P. Howekamp, Director, Air Management Division, Region IX, dated October 6, 1987 (attached). It is important to note that the interpretation contained in this memorandum was only applicable to landfills.

²In fact, the 1980 preamble language recognized the concern that sources could avoid NSR by calling emissions fugitives, even if the source could capture those emissions. The EPA's originally-proposed definition of fugitive emissions was changed in the final 1980 regulations to "ensure that sources will not discharge as fugitive emissions those emissions which would ordinarily be collected and discharged through stacks or other functionally equivalent openings, and will eliminate disincentives for the construction of ductwork and stacks for the collection of emissions." Id.

Specifically with regard to landfill gas emissions, gas collection and mitigation technologies have evolved significantly since 1987, and use of these systems has become much more common. Increasingly, landfills are constructed or retrofitted with gas collection systems for purposes of energy recovery and in order to comply with State and Federal regulatory requirements designed to address public health and welfare concerns. In addition, EPA has proposed performance standards for new landfills under section 111(b) of the Clean Air Act and has proposed guidelines for existing landfills under section 111(d) that, when promulgated, will require gas collection systems for existing and new landfills that are above a certain size and gas production level (see 56 FR 24468, May 30, 1991). Under these requirements, EPA estimates that between 500 and 700 medium and large landfills will have to collect and control landfill gas. The EPA believes this proposal created a presumption at that time that the proposed gas collection systems, at a minimum, are reasonable for landfills that would be subject to such control under the proposal.

Thus, EPA believes it is no longer appropriate to conclude generally that landfill gas could not reasonably be collected at a proposed landfill project that does not include a gas collection system. The fact that a proposed landfill project does not include a collection system in its proposed design is not determinative of whether emissions from a landfill are fugitive. To quantify the amount of landfill gas which could otherwise be collected at a proposed landfill for NSR applicability purposes, the air pollution control authority should assume the use of a collection system which has been designed to maximize, to the greatest extent possible, the capture of air pollutants from the landfill.

In summary, the use of collection technology by other landfill sources, whether or not subject to EPA's proposed requirements or to State implementation plan or permit requirements, creates a presumption that collection of the emissions is reasonable at other similar sources. If such a system can reasonably be designed to collect the landfill's gas emissions, then the emissions are not fugitive and should be considered in determining whether a major NSR permit is required.

Today's guidance is applicable to the construction of a new landfill or the expansion of an existing landfill beyond its currently-permitted capacity. To avoid any confusion regarding the applicability of major NSR to existing landfills, EPA does not plan to reconsider or recommend that States reconsider the major NSR status of any existing landfill based on the issues discussed in this memorandum. Also, nothing in this guidance voids or creates an exclusion from any otherwise applicable requirement under the Clean Air Act and the State implementation plan, including minor source review.

The Regional Offices should send this memorandum, including the attachment, to States within their jurisdiction. Questions concerning specific issues and cases should be directed to the appropriate Regional Office. Regional Office staff may contact Mr. David Solomon, Chief, New Source Review Section, at (919) 541-5375, if they have any questions.

Attachment

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