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For Immediate Release – April 5, 2023

Medical Waste Incineration Bill Passes Senate Committee

Senate Bill 488-6, which passed out of the Senate Committee on Energy and Environment with bipartisan support, will set new standards for monitoring dioxins and heavy metals emitted to the air.

Salem, OR – Senate Bill 488 would require one of Oregon’s biggest polluters to closely monitor toxic emissions and report findings to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality. The bill’s requirements apply to Covanta Marion, Oregon’s only medical waste incinerator, the nation’s fourth largest medical waste incinerator. An amended version of SB 488 passed out of the Senate Committee on Environment and Energy on April 4. The bill passed 3-2 along partisan lines.

Senate Bill 488 would require continuous air quality testing at the facility to monitor for high levels of toxic chemicals known to cause cancer and other ailments.

Covanta is located in Brooks, in Marion County, just north of Salem. Residents in the immediate area are impacted by toxic pollution from the incineration of untreated medical waste, which release dioxins, heavy metals, and climate-driving greenhouse gasses into the atmosphere. Not only are residents of Brooks, Woodburn, Gervais, and surrounding areas affected, but the entire mid-Willamette Valley watershed is impacted by toxic emissions.

"I served in a congregation a few miles downwind from this incinerator. Over the course of eight years, in this church with 100 members, I buried 30 people. Nearly all of them died from cancer – throat cancers, breast cancers, esophageal cancers, pancreatic cancers, prostate cancers among them," said **Senator Deb Patterson**, chief sponsor of the bill.

“We need to do [by passing SB 488] what we can to be sure that the air we are breathing and the water we are drinking is safe.”

“The incineration of medical waste is an environmental justice issue for communities surrounding the Covanta Marion facility,” said **Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of Beyond Toxics**. “These families face the highest risk to learning disabilities, chronic illness and cancer due to their proximity. Oregon has become a dumping ground for medical waste from other states, and we need to protect these families from corporations that are exploiting loopholes in Oregon’s waste regulations and profiting from it.”

Covanta Marion has operated under Oregon Department of Environmental Quality regulations as a municipal waste incinerator for decades. Municipal waste is generally less toxic than medical waste. In 2008, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency created stricter regulations for large medical waste incinerators to address this. Covanta Marion burns over 15,000 tons of medical waste each year. That, according to the EPA’s definition, would classify this facility as a large medical waste incinerator. However, due to a loophole in DEQ’s regulations, Covanta has been allowed to operate under less-restrictive guidelines as a municipal waste incinerator. This bill would close that loophole.

Senate Bill 488 is supported by Beyond Toxics, Clean Air Now! Coalition, Oregon Environmental Council, Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility, Salem 350, Oceana, Surfrider Foundation, and Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (PCUN). Chief Sponsors of the bill are Sen. Deb Patterson (D-10), Sen. James Manning, Jr. (D-7), and Rep. Courtney Neron (D-26). More information about the bill can be found at beyondtoxics.org.

Beyond Toxics provides leadership to build a community-driven environmental justice movement for a thriving and just Oregon. We envision a society where everyone has equitable access to healthy food and clean air and water, and underserved communities are included in decision making processes that affect them. Together, we move beyond the damaging environmental practices of the past and collectively work to support and maintain ecological resilience and balance.