

Waste, a rich source for innovation at Interwaste

By  [Sindy Peters](#)

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As [#SustainabilityMonth on Bizcommunity](#) draws to a close, we interview Mike Nicholls, director of Technical Services at [Interwaste](#) to find out their take on current waste management practices and legislation in South Africa, how the process of waste management has been refined over the years, and what the waste management model of the future looks like.



■ How would you rate South Africa's waste management practices and legislation?

South African waste management practices and legislation actually fairs very well in comparison to our international counterparts. However, we know that the Department of Environmental Affairs face a series of ongoing challenges to ensure that all South Africans adopt viable waste management behaviour – and given our growing population, which has resulted in larger amounts of waste being generated, this is exerting more pressure on the country's waste management infrastructure.

In addition to this, the Department of Environmental Affairs continues to work hard to undo some of the damage that was caused by ineffective waste management practices of the past, as evidenced in the backlog of waste services in urban informal areas and rural areas around South Africa.

However, the minister of Water and Environmental Affairs has set new regulations and standards for the classification, management and disposal of waste under the National Environmental Management: Waste Act (Act 59 of 2008), which will significantly change and expand the legal framework of regulating waste management in South Africa, as well as increases the compliance requirements for waste generators, transporters and waste managers. This, in itself, demonstrates government's intention to improve and expand the regulation of waste generation and management in South Africa.

Unfortunately, though, even despite efforts by government to improve the legal framework, it will take more intensified efforts, by corporate SA, and all citizens, to achieve the objectives of the Waste Act.

■ How has waste management been refined over the last 5-10 years?

Historically, waste was just that – waste - but in more recent times, people are slowly realising the value that lies within waste.



Mke Nicholls, director of Technical Services at Interwaste

This means that we are beginning to see more and more businesses incorporating responsible waste management practices into their models and strategy - where it is no longer merely about the 'bottom line' but cognisance is now being given to creating value for organisations, through aspects like taking the environment, in which the business operates, into consideration.

Consumers, too, are beginning to embrace responsible waste management behaviour within their households and work environments. Going "green" has become today's buzzword as seen in the increased number of campaigns that seek to encourage consumers to manage their waste effectively.

Even shopping centres have implemented sustainable ways in which to safeguard the future of the environment by placing clearly marked containers for shoppers to place their recycling – let's be honest, it is so much easier today to actually support correct waste management principles.

Despite this, I still believe that there is a real need for all waste generators to actively start developing solutions that divert waste from landfills. In fact, it's critical, especially if we take into account the findings of the Green Biz 2016 report, which stated that South Africa will have no landfill space by 2024, as a result of an overflow of waste.

■ What are the alternative waste management options that Interwaste offers?

In February this year, we officially launched South Africa's first Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) plant, which will reduce waste to landfill, as part of our continuous efforts to contribute to government's efforts to reduce the country's carbon footprint. The plant, which is the first of four lines that may be expanded into KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern and Western Cape regions - pioneer's general, industrial and municipal waste to alternative fuels - all while ensuring less reliance on South Africa's vital resources and resources that are carbon intensive.

We also recently became the net exporter of Refuse Derived Fuel (RDF) into the international cement industry, which significantly eases the burden off waste management systems in other countries around Africa.

We also have our tops & tags initiative. The programme, which was launched in 2011, collects bottle tops and bread tags from schools, churches and corporates, which are then weighed, and for every every 300kg of bottle tops or bread tags that Interwaste receives, a registered recipient receives a wheelchair.

■ Tell us about some of the technological innovations developed at Interwaste that have allowed it to turn waste into wealth.

Our recently launched RDF plant gives us the opportunity to not only continue to advocate safe operational practices, which take our environment into account, but also reduce our customer's operational expenses.

In fact, the plant – located at our Germiston depot - is expected to see a minimum of 12,000 tonnes of general, industrial and municipal waste converted to alternative fuel annually for use in the South African manufacturing sector.

Our vision is to continue to explore and launch alternative waste management solutions, like RDF, which will allow

participating companies to pay back any additional capital investments made within five years - as the fuel will offer a more substantial economic alternative to traditional fuel – which has a direct impact on their operational expenses.

By using refuse derived fuels, companies also lessen their reliance on fossil fuels, which is known to have a high environmental impact including global warming.

■ **What are the basic activities that businesses should be engaging in at this stage to ensure a more sustainable human-natural environment?**

One of the services we offer our clients is onsite support when it comes to separating and grouping all waste on their premises into recyclables and non-recyclables, where we only send general waste to landfill. As a result, we are beginning to notice that more businesses take recycling far more seriously and some are even implementing their recycling programmes to encourage staff to dispose of their waste more responsibly in a simple way.

■ **What is the waste management model of the future?**

South Africa's waste economy has been in the spotlight in recent months, given the prevalence of air pollution in the country, which resulted in South Africa being ranked 162 by the World Health Organisation in its 2016 Global Air Pollution Database.

As a result, in the future waste operators and management companies will be presented with an opportunity to turn waste in a money saver and revenue generator, relieving the pressure off our landfill sites – and they must take it. We have to see more waste being converted to energy and the best option for this is through the use of refuse derived fuels.

Lastly, any future waste models must seek to provide solutions to address South African's energy crisis by using waste to provide alternative environmentally friendly products in creating energy.

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