

# Ontario construction waste costs as much as \$1.7 Billion to manage and transport, says RCCAO

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It costs between \$700 million and \$1.7 billion to manage and transport all of Ontario's excess construction site soil each year, a new report from the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario estimates.

RCCAO has been warning about the rising costs of managing excess soil, and since the last election, has been encouraging the provincial government to develop a set of best practices to help improve the situation.

The government agreed, and as part of that process, the environment ministry asked the RCCAO for information about how much excess soil is produced in Ontario, prompting the report.

"MOE has been calling around, probably not just in the last several months, but maybe even a year or so, trying to get a handle on how much soil is being generated," said Andy Manahan, RCCAO executive director.

The report found that if all the excess construction site soil in the province were put in one pile, that pile would be a kilometer long and a kilometer wide, and 25 metres high. "The quantity of excavated materials that needed to be taken off of the construction sites across Ontario for permanent placement at a third party site ranged from a low of just under 16 million cubic metres per year to a high of almost 25 million cubic metres per year during the period of 2008 through 2010," the report found.

In four years or less, Ontario would produce as much excess soil as 10 years of construction of the Suez Canal, the report notes.

The report acknowledges that the estimate isn't precise – there is a lack of information on the amount of excess soils produced, and the data that the writers of the report had to work with wasn't complete, lacking, for example, statistics on the construction of student residences, daycares, and libraries, along with other types of projects.

"I think this is the best estimate you can come up with. It's probably not a bulletproof number, because it is difficult to determine, but... its at least a starting point to have a conversation about the magnitude of the soils that are generated and either taken to another site or landfill or what have you," said Manahan.

The process of developing the best practices will go on despite the surprise prorogation of the Ontario parliament and resignation of premier Dalton McGuinty on Oct. 15. At the same time that the government is working on its best practices, RCCAO is working on a similar document of its own. At press time for this paper, Manahan said he hoped it would be released by the end of October.

“I just spoke with MOE and [both documents] will proceed, since it’s not caught up in what was announced by McGuinty,” he said. “That was very reassuring to hear, since we’ve put so much effort into this.”

Manahan says he hopes over time, a database can be developed and more detailed stats on excess soil can be developed. Better tracking means a better opportunity to re-use that earth. This would also allow the development of a system where excess soil from one site can be matched with a construction site that needs it.

“The goal is – we can’t really get down to zero – but it’s to start trending down towards zero,” said Manahan.

The RCCAO best practices are based on the Contaminated Lands: Applications in Real Environments (CL:AIRE) approach that has been used in Britain. After it was introduced, the distance soil had to be trucked and fuel use by trucks shrank, and the amount of land that ended up in landfills fell to almost zero – meaning the approach had both economic and environmental benefits, said Manahan, adding that the CL:AIRE allows greater clarity over what is waste and what isn’t.

“The thing that’s good about CL:AIRE is that it’s not a department of the U.K. government. It’s a stand-alone agency that sits in the middle between the government and the industry and academia, so it covers all sorts of different concerns,” he explained. “And it has people on its board from all those different sectors, and from what we heard, it seems to work.”

CL:AIRE introduced a “soil dating service,” as Manahan jokingly described it, matching up construction sites that need soil with those who have an excess using an online bulletin board. More than half of those who use the bulletin board are actually looking for soil – a “real eye opener,” Manahan noted.

He added that different areas of the province will likely require different approaches.

“It’s a complex issue, and there’s going to be no single solution or no magic bullet,” he said. “There will be different solutions for different jurisdictions, and we’re just saying, ‘let’s try a bunch of them,’ but a non-regulatory approach I think is the one that’s definitely going to work the best right now, based on the current situation at Queen’s Park.”