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CIVIL
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Here's the 'dirt' on excess construction soil: Millions of cubic metres going to landfill could be re-used instead, says RCCAO

TORONTO (November 12, 2012) – On average, 20 to 25 million cubic metres of excess soil are excavated annually from construction sites across Ontario. That's equal to one square kilometre of earth, 25 metres in height.

Where does it go? Much of it is sent to landfill.

And for many environmental and economic reasons, that's wrong, says the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario. RCCAO is proposing some innovative alternatives.

One idea being floated is implementing a 'soil matching service' similar to a system in operation in the U.K. The online service brings together generators and receivers of excess construction soils, and facilities transfers between them.

"Our current dig-and-dump practice in Ontario is just not sustainable," notes Andy Manahan, Executive Director of RCCAO. For example, the added costs associated with landfilling excavated soil result in taxpayers having to pay up to 15% more for road, sewer and water projects, public transit and other infrastructure. That's an extra tax burden of more than \$1.7 billion a year, according to an RCCAO study.

Landfilling this soil also means more trucks on the road and increased greenhouse gas emissions. Another consequence is that disposal sites fill up more quickly, displacing available capacity for the legitimate waste stream.

RCCAO has been spearheading efforts to develop best practices for handling excess construction soils. In collaboration with government, it formed a steering committee earlier this year, and its new report – which can be viewed at www.rccao.com – advances some positive solutions.

"We take the approach that excavated soil is a valuable resource, that it should be re-used if possible rather than landfilled as waste," explains Manahan. Modeled on the initiative between the private sector and government in the U.K., RCCAO proposes:

- A system which recognizes that some soil can be re-used, or remediated and re-used. Currently in Ontario, almost all soil is treated like it was taken from brownfield sites and is considered unsuitable for re-use.
- Implementation of the online 'soil matching service'.

- A transparent process that produces a Materials Management Plan (MMP) for the handling of non-waste excess soils tied to the remediation and/or development plans for the site involved.
- The further development of soil recycling centres.

"The main objective is to reduce the amount of excess construction soil being shipped to landfill, and to do so in a way that is consistent with regulatory requirements of producing no adverse effect on human health or the environment," says Manahan.

He notes that RCCAO's proposals are designed to provide suggested guidance with respect to the handling of soil from non-contaminated sites. At present, only soils associated with brownfield sites are regulated. Unfortunately, because of liability concerns, some municipalities and private companies are choosing to apply MOE's stringent regulations to all excavated soils.

This has led to some municipalities restricting or banning the importation of soils from outside their jurisdictions. "For the construction industry, this only results in having to haul further, driving up costs even more," Manahan says.

The more flexible, pragmatic approach being advocated by RCCAO would produce significant benefits, including:

- A greater portion of the tax dollars now being spent on disposing of excess soils could be redirected to investments in critical infrastructure.
- Less pressure on landfill sites.
- Reduced truck traffic and emissions.

RCCAO plans to field test its proposals and to further refine its best management practices.

Ontario Environment Minister Jim Bradley says RCCAO's report "is a good step forward as we move toward new rules for use of excess construction soils. The province will be putting forward its proposals shortly for public comment."

RCCAO is an alliance composed of management and labour groups in the construction industry. Its goal is to work in cooperation with governments and related stakeholders to offer realistic solutions to a variety of challenges facing the sector.

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