

HIRIYA AND DUDA'IM: A TALE OF TWO LANDFILLS

Israel's most infamous garbage dump—Hiriya—was finally shut down in August 1998 after serving the Tel Aviv region for fifty years

It seemed a case of *deja vu*—but this time it was for real. The latest in a long line of deadlines for closure of Israel's most infamous landfill, Hiriya, was finally met—in August 1998. Again and again, despite a 1993 government decision to shut down the 84-meter-high landfill adjacent to Ben-Gurion International Airport by the end of 1995, the NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) syndrome foiled attempts to shut down Hiriya and transfer its waste to an improved and expanded landfill in the south of the country. In fact, all of the central landfills slated to replace hundreds of illegal dump sites throughout Israel have faced fierce opposition—whether by local residents, local authorities loath to pay the extra costs of transporting their solid waste to distant sites or, in the case of the central Negev site of Oron, by the Air Force, due to concern that birds would jeopardize training exercises in the area.

Few have disputed the need to shut down Hiriya. The reasons: full capacity--the site has accumulated some 25 million tons of waste since its establishment in the early 1950s, potential contamination of groundwater sources, stench, air pollution, aesthetic blight, and as the garbage mountain continued to rise, severe threats to flight safety due to the congregation of birds in the flight paths leading to Israel's international airport. And if this was not enough, last year's winter rains provided yet another reason. Thousands of tons of garbage, loosened by heavy rains, slid down the northwestern side of landfill in December 1997 and into the Ayalon River, clogging the river, threatening large-scale flooding, and endangering nearby Tel Aviv neighborhoods with contamination. As emergency measures were taken to divert the river and reinforce Hiriya's walls, the controversy deepened. It was clearly time for action.

Duda'im: Trials and Tribulations

An essential component of the 1993 landmark government decision to close Hiriya and open several new landfills throughout the country was transfer of the waste generated in the Tel Aviv metropolitan region southward to Duda'im, several kilometers northwest of Beersheba. The existing waste disposal site at Duda'im was to be upgraded in the interim and a new and expanded landfill was to be built nearby according to stringent environmental requirements. In line with the government decision, the National Planning and Building Board amended the National Outline Scheme for Solid Waste Disposal in May 1994, and called for the preparation of a partial national masterplan for Duda'im. The masterplan was prepared at a level of detailed planning and was based on the findings of an environmental impact statement prepared in accordance with Ministry of the Environment guidelines.

In June 1996, the National Planning and Building Board approved the masterplan, but with three changes:

- The area for the expanded site to be constructed adjacent to the existing landfill would be substantially reduced and the period for its operation as a central landfill would be reduced to three years with a possibility for a three year renewal;

- The total quantity of waste which would be received at the site would not exceed 2,715 tons per day;
- A follow-up committee, including representatives of Beersheba and the vicinity, would be appointed to serve a “watchdog” function over implementation of the plan and operation of the site.

Government approval of Duda'im as a provisional central landfill which would serve as an alternative to Hiriya until completion of a new central landfill (Oron) followed in December 1996.

However, several elements combined to impede progress. The foremost obstacle lay in Beersheba itself. With the staunch backing of its residents, the municipality waged an uncompromising battle against the plan to transport the waste of the central region to Duda'im. Its claim—the government was intent on transforming the Negev into the garbage dump of the country. At the same time, the Defense Ministry warned that transforming Oron, a phosphate quarry in the center of the Negev, into a central landfill would attract birds and jeopardize Air Force training exercises in the Negev area. This led to several subsequent decisions by the National Planning and Building Board: to approve Oron as a national waste site for non-domestic waste, to designate Mishor Rotem as the alternative central landfill, and to approve the guidelines for an environmental impact statement for Mishor Rotem.

The final impetus for closing down Hiriya came along with the winter rains of 1997. Following the partial collapse of the "garbage mountain," the government could afford to wait no longer. A ministerial committee, headed by the prime minister himself, was set up to come up with a final plan for closing Hiriya and evaluating alternatives—and immediately. In a January 18, 1998 decision, the government called on an interministerial committee to do the following:

- To promote, within six to eight months, the approval processes for planning, licensing and preparing Mishor Rotem to serve as Israel's central site for waste disposal instead of Oron.
- To call on the Minister of the Interior to act immediately to cancel the landfilling permit for Hiriya.
- To call on the Minister of the Environment, in cooperation with the Minister of Defense, to establish landfill sites, including Duda'im, which would be capable of absorbing Hiriya's waste until final approval of Mishor Rotem as a central landfill.
- To call on the Minister of the Interior to appoint a follow-up committee as per the decision of the National Planning and Building Board.

This time action was not long in coming. A directors-general committee was set up to implement the decision. The Ministry of the Interior and the District Planning and Building Commission decided to order the closure of Hiriya within two months. The Director General of the Ministry of the Environment informed the team that preparations for the expanded site (Duda'im B) would now begin and that, in the interim, no more than 1,500 tons of waste per day would be transported from Hiriya to the existing site (Duda'im A). Moreover, Duda'im A would be required to comply with stringent environmental conditions incorporated in its business license.

Nevertheless, the road was not clear yet. As plans for transport of the waste from Hiriya to Duda'im began to be implemented, the municipality of Beersheba along with six other local authorities in the vicinity petitioned the High Court of Justice against the decision to use Duda'im as a central landfill—even if only temporarily. However, their petition against the Government of Israel and 14 additional respondents, including the Minister of the Environment, was soon rejected. In a March 1998 decision, the High Court of Justice ruled against the petitioners. The judges accepted the position of the state that new landfills cannot be established in the center of the country due to the risk of water pollution, that a new landfill site had to be opened urgently in order to prevent further safety risks at Hiriya, and that the decisions and plans for Duda'im were neither illegal nor unreasonable. Nonetheless, the final verdict set down three conditions for operation of the existing site (Duda'im A):

- Infrastructure work for upgrading the site according to business licensing conditions imposed by the Ministry of the Environment will be completed by the end of June 1998;
- The quantity of waste to be transported to the site will not exceed 1,500 tons per day;
- Duda'im A will cease to function as a central landfill as soon as the expanded site, Duda'im B is established—hopefully by the end of 1998.

A New Path Toward the Future

In August 1998, after serving as the main garbage dump for the heavily populated central region of Israel for 50 years, Hiriya was finally closed. A temporary transfer station now operates at the site. Half of the waste which arrives at the site is now directed to Duda'im and other half to other landfills throughout the country. A permanent sorting and transfer station, capable of handling some 4,000 tons of solid waste per day, will soon operate at the site. Waste will then be sorted and separated into different waste streams, each destined for different treatment--refuse-derived fuel, composting, recycling or landfilling.

On the Hiriya front, plans are now concentrating on stabilizing and rehabilitating the dump—preparing it for transformation from dump to park. Some 15 artists from Israel and abroad have already presented proposals and ideas for this transformation. On the Duda'im front, the existing waste disposal site, which has long operated at low standards with few safeguards, has been upgraded to comply with high environmental standards. The new site at Duda'im will soon be inaugurated and will serve as a central landfill until an alternative at Mishor Rotem, or elsewhere, is completed.

Nine government decisions on Hiriya were taken between June 1993 and January 1998. The coming years will finally see the implementation of these decisions. With just the right doses of good will, hard work and planning, Israel may yet be on its way to a new era of environmentally sound waste management.