

# Taking the Trash Out - by the Trainload

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Those who even casually observe rail operations in the DC-Richmond-Petersburg Corridor have noticed, for several years now, trainloads of huge green or gray boxes, which it turns out are loaded in the southbound direction with "MSW", that's municipal solid waste. That is but one of several regular rail movements of MSW originating in the northeast, and destined for commercial landfills in Virginia, or beyond. At CSX's Collier Yard in Petersburg, the "Green Box" train, which originates in New York City, is handed off to Norfolk Southern for the final few miles down to Waste Management's huge disposal site near Waverly, VA.

According to the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, some 5.5 million tons of out-of-state MSW was brought into Virginia to be disposed of last year. This represented about 28% of total tonnage "dumped" in Virginia in 2010. The very idea of taking New York "garbage" is offensive to some, but if it must come, it is good that much of it moves by rail. Out-of-state trash-hauling trucks are regularly seen on I-95 and, worse still, on some secondary routes, but we suspect the vast majority of out-of-state MSW comes into, or through, Virginia by rail, to landfills such as those in King George, Amelia and Sussex Counties. MSW generates welcome revenue for the "host" counties, and obviously for the rail carriers. Imagine a rail freight commodity immune to loss and damage, with no complaints when the train is late! In reality, these MSW trains move on priority schedules in order to make the roundtrip as quickly as possible. Picture the poor transfer station superintendent in N.Y. who runs out of boxes to fill. That's small consolation to the Amtrak and VRE riders who occasionally have reason to suspect that a train load of N.Y. "garbage" got priority over his or her passenger train.

While rail-haul of MSW from some large urban area has grown to be an important line of business, the concept is not new. For many years, going way back in time, the District of Columbia owned and operated a land fill at Cherry Hill in Prince William County, VA. DC had their own rail cars, which RF&P moved down and back. It was a crude, smelly system, not at all like the present arrangement. Back in the sixties and seventies (1960's-1970's), RF&P, PRR and B&O collaborated on proposed "unit trains" of MSW, including incinerator residue, but without success, as close-in landfills were then still available. Now they are not, and the trains are running. As in the famous wine commercial, large-scale rail movement of MSW could not be forced before its time!

One final observation on this subject: For decades, southbound freight trains crossing the Potomac River were loaded with domestically-produced consumer goods, as well as with merchandise imported through the Ports of NY and NJ, all destined for markets in Virginia and the South. Now many freight trains move the "throw-away" residue of mostly foreign-made

items, in the form of MSW. Isn't something wrong with this picture? But we will have to give the rails credit; when offered lemons, they have made lemonade!

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