

Hazardous waste fuel option carries its own risks, warns groundWork

Ingi Salgado
Cape Town

Cement producers hope to burn alternative fuels, including materials classified as hazardous waste instead of coal, in a large-scale effort to cut emissions of carbon dioxide.

The initiatives follow the example of countries such as

Canada, the US and several EU nations, including Norway and France. But there is concern that incineration of hazardous waste in cement kilns has the potential to produce dioxins, a toxic carcinogen.

Bobby Peek, the director of the environmental organisation groundWork, said South African cement producers were

not equipped to burn hazardous waste safely.

The industry is currently regulated only for dust emissions by the environmental affairs and tourism department. Peek said: "There is very little understanding of what their other emissions are."

He said there had been no health status analysis of the

rural communities located close to cement kilns, or even direct negotiation with those communities.

Responding to the argument that burning waste would reduce carbon dioxide emissions, he pointed out that the bulk of carbon emissions were generated from the chemical process of breaking down lime – not

from burning coal.

Peek believes that as a starting point, the government needs to understand the types and volumes of hazardous waste in South Africa. Thereafter, it should put in place simple legislation for the incineration of hazardous waste and ensure effective monitoring.

Pretoria Portland Cement is

understood to be currently burning hazardous waste in the Western Cape and Port Elizabeth.

Lafarge South Africa chief executive Albert Corcos said the firm was looking to burn alternative fuels, "but for the time being it's just a project". Corcos said: "it's not something to implement in South Africa."

This was because the sector was not yet fully regulated, said Corcos, who nevertheless believed that partly substituting waste for coal would have a "positive effect on emissions".

He said Lafarge's efficiency ratio was lower than the South African average because of its use of extenders to reduce the clinker factor in cement.

