

BACKGROUND

Dickerson itself is not a town with a mayor and main street government; it's an unincorporated community in Montgomery County's Agricultural Reserve, wedged between Maryland Route 28, the Potomac River, and the Frederick County line. The county government—run under a charter, county-executive / county-council system—makes the big decisions here, not a local town hall.

Reworld: From Ogden → Covanta → Reworld

Reworld was founded in 1939 as the Ogden Corporation, a public-utility holding company that later morphed into a diversified conglomerate. In 2001 it refocused on energy-from-waste, rebranded as Covanta, and built a portfolio of waste-to-energy plants across North America and overseas.

By 2018, the company operated 40+ waste-to-energy facilities, burning about 20 million tons of trash per year and recovering roughly 550,000 tons of metal for recycling. In 2024, after being acquired by [private-equity firm EQT](#), Covanta announced a major rebrand: it would now do business as Reworld Holding Corporation, signaling a broader push into “circular economy” services, thermomechanical treatment facilities (TTFs), and alternative engineered fuels (Waste Dive).

Today, Reworld says it has roughly 100 facilities—waste-to-energy plants, materials processing facilities, transfer stations, and service centers—with more than 4,500 employees. In the Washington, D.C. region, that network includes:

- 01** | Reworld Montgomery (Dickerson RRF) in Dickerson, MD
- 02** | The Alexandria/Arlington Waste-to-Energy Facility in Alexandria, VA (about 20–25 miles away)
- 03** | The I-95 Energy Resource Recovery Facility in Lorton, VA, operated as Reworld Fairfax, which processes over 1.1 million tons of waste annually for Fairfax County.

The Dickerson RRF: How It Works and Why It Matters

The facility began commercial operation in August 1995 and sits on 34 acres next to the now-decommissioned Dickerson coal & gas generating station.

This is an overview of what happens inside the facility:

- 01** | **Waste arrives by rail.**
Household trash from across Montgomery County is first dropped at the [Shady Grove Transfer Station](#) in Derwood. There it's compacted into intermodal containers and shipped by rail to Dickerson, reducing truck traffic on rural roads.
- 02** | **Mass-burn combustion.**
At Dickerson, Reworld Montgomery operates three furnaces, each capable of burning about 600 tons of waste per day, for a total of roughly 1,800 tons/day.
- 03** | **Energy recovery.**
The heat turns water into steam, which drives a turbine to generate up to 63 megawatts (MW) of electricity—enough to power tens of thousands of homes and help supply the regional PJM grid¹.
- 04** | **Metals & Ash.**
After combustion, magnets and eddy-current systems pull out ferrous and non-ferrous metals for recycling. The remaining ash, about 10–25% of the original mass, is landfilled, reducing the volume of waste by roughly 75–90% compared with raw trash. Northeast Maryland Waste Authority

¹The PJM grid is the largest electric transmission system in the United States, operated by PJM Interconnection, a regional transmission organization (RTO) that serves all or part of 13 states and the District of Columbia. Its core function is to coordinate the wholesale electricity market, ensure reliability, and manage the high-voltage power lines to deliver electricity from generators to local distribution companies for about 65 million people. (PJM = Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Maryland)

The county's Comprehensive Solid Waste Management Plan describes the RRF as a critical part of its integrated waste strategy, especially for diverting waste from landfills and generating “alternative clean energy.”

At the same time, local officials are openly debating how long to keep relying on the plant. In 2025, Montgomery County leaders acknowledged they might need to spend over \$57 million on repairs over four years to keep the facility running, even though the county executive has repeatedly pledged to close it due to environmental and health concerns (The Washington Post).

Who Lives Around Dickerson?

Dickerson itself (ZIP code 20842) is small and semi-rural, with a 2000 population of about 1,848 residents. Earlier census data show a population that is predominantly white, with relatively small shares of other racial and ethnic groups.

Recent household-income data for the 20842 area show a median household income around \$166,000 and an average income over \$190,000 as of 2023, indicating a relatively affluent local population. (Point2Homes)

The wider Montgomery County area (population ~1.06 million) is far more diverse: about 38% non-Hispanic white, 22% Hispanic, 18% Black, and 16% Asian, with a median household income of about \$128,700 in 2023.

THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S FINANCIAL PICTURE

Because Dickerson is an unincorporated community, the main public decision-maker is the **Montgomery County Government**. The county operates under a **charter** with an elected **County Executive** and an **11-member County Council** that serves as the legislative body.

In fiscal terms, this is not a small municipality with a thin budget:

The **FY 2025 recommended operating budget** was about **\$7.1 billion**, covering schools, transportation, public safety, health services, and environmental programs.

By May 2025, the County Council approved an even larger **\$7.6 billion FY 2026 budget**, highlighting continued growth in spending and commitments to schools and social services.

For a facility like Dickerson, this matters:

The county now faces tens of millions of dollars in repair and maintenance costs on top of its other budget priorities, and any long-term decision (close, upgrade, or replace the plant) must be weighed against those fiscal realities.



Pollution and Health Outcomes Around Dickerson

What the Risk Assessments Say

Montgomery County committed early on to evaluating health risks from the facility. A 2014 Health Risk Assessment (HRA) Update for the Dickerson RRF concluded that:

- ✔ Cancer risks from stack emissions were 10–250 times lower than the target risk level of 1 in 100,000.
- ✔ Non-cancer hazard indices were 10–600 times below the county's target level.

A Maryland fact sheet summarizing multiple EfW facilities—including Montgomery County's—similarly notes that modern plants with advanced emission-control systems show a “very low chance” of significant health risks when operated in compliance with current standards. In other words, under modeled conditions and assuming strong pollution controls, the plant's emissions are expected to stay below regulatory thresholds.

What Critics and Residents Say

However, more recent reporting paints a more contentious picture:

- ✔ A 2025 article in The Washington Post notes that the Dickerson incinerator burns about 565,000 tons of waste annually, has been “authorized to emit numerous toxic pollutants,” and has become a focal point of debate as the county considers whether to invest \$57 million in repairs or move toward alternatives. ([Bethesda Magazine](#))
- ✔ Local advocates point to emissions data indicating releases of heavy metals and other pollutants. One analysis by an environmental-justice group says the facility reported 24 pounds of mercury emissions in 2014, not including what ends up in ash. ([Energy Justice Network](#))
- ✔ Community members and some officials have expressed concern about rising rates of cancer and respiratory disease in the broader region, though these claims are based on patterns they observe rather than definitive epidemiological studies directly linking illness to the RRF.

Reworld's Biofuel-Adjacent Technology

Reworld has a product line called ReKiln Fuels™, which falls under the broader category of Alternative Engineered Fuels (AEFs). According to the company:

ReKiln Fuels convert non-recyclable industrial and post-consumer wastes—like contaminated plastics, textiles, and other mixed materials—into low-carbon, engineered fuels designed for cement and lime kilns, power plants, & paper mills. These fuels are solid or pelletized, not liquid gasoline or diesel. They are a kind of “biofuel-adjacent” product: often partly biogenic (derived from biomass-containing waste) and partly fossil-derived (e.g., plastics).

In 2025, Reworld reported expanding its non-incineration capacity and bringing multiple new materials-processing facilities (MPFs) online, some of which integrate ReKiln technology specifically for producing alternative engineered fuels.

So, at the corporate level, Reworld is clearly investing in waste-to-fuel solutions that can displace coal or petcoke in heavy industry.

[Petcoke](#) is a byproduct created when bitumen found in tar sands, like those in Alberta, Canada, is refined into crude oil.

Note: [Comprehensive Solid Waste Management \(page 5-15; section 5.3.4\)](#)