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The step beyond recycling

By Eleanor Saunders//Special To The Tab
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Three things are true about garbage today. First, the amount our cities and towns handle has more than tripled over the last fifty years, as product wastes increase dramatically and recycling recaptures only about 30 percent of what we throw away. Second, the manufacturers who feed this waste stream - packaging companies, the electronics and computer industry, textile and carpet producers to name a few - benefit from passing the financial responsibility for their discarded products onto our municipalities. Third, garbage collection and even recycling have become big business, dominated by national and multinational corporations that operate in the global marketplace and thrive on this very waste stream. Thus, rapidly increasing bills for garbage burden taxpayers, while manufacturers and waste management companies profit from the current way of doing business.

In addition, we are running out of sites for landfills. Few communities want to contend with landfill nuisance factors - odor, pests, and commercial traffic from dump trucks. Even fewer want to accept the risks associated with the hazardous leachates created when buried garbage breaks down. Despite new technologies and precautions, landfill leakages frequently occur, and the toxic metals, carcinogens, and endocrine disrupters in decomposing waste escape their safety nets. Incinerating garbage brings with it similar problems - heavy truck traffic to incinerator sites plus toxic residues concentrated in the ashy remains. And both these methods of disposal contribute to climate change by producing significant amounts of greenhouse gas, including one third of our methane emissions, a gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

Daunting as all of this sounds, you may be surprised to hear that there already is a tested approach which can significantly reduce these problems. However, it is an approach that requires us, the taxpayers, to exert a substantial amount of political will against the industries that profit from and lobby for the status quo. The approach is called Extended Producer Responsibility. It recognizes that we who are downstream of production cannot do much but try to cope with the amount and types of product waste that come our way. However, upstream, at factories, a great deal can be done through innovations in product design and manufacturing. EPR and its close policy relative Product Stewardship shift at least some responsibility for waste from municipalities to manufacturers and thereby promote a reduction of environmental impacts at all stages of a product's life-cycle.

Producers are free to design their own product take-back schemes and to select whatever means of recycling and reducing hazardous materials make most financial sense to them - so long as they meet agreed upon performance standards and timetables. The experience of European Union countries, Canada, and Australia since the1990s demonstrates how effective attacking waste problems from this end can be.

And a whole array of solutions ranging from strict government regulations to voluntary agreements are there to be assessed for effectiveness and implementation in the U.S.

Here is one small example of what could happen if EPR policies were in place. Nationally, about 3 - 4 billion pounds of nylon carpeting are discarded each year, costing around $100 million dollars in hauling and disposal fees. As currently manufactured, much of this carpeting cannot be recycled and also contains hazardous dyes and materials. However, a commercially viable, environmentally sound carpet material already exists. Called nylon 6, it can be manufactured in eco-efficient ways, such that at the end of its useful life, old carpeting can be broken down and re-manufactured into high quality nylon 6 material, over and over again. Waste is effectively eliminated. Today, a few U.S. and Canadian companies produce nylon 6 carpeting made without hazardous chemical dyes and with special backing and adhesives, designed to facilitate the re-manufacturing process. Nylon 6 even has the potential for applications beyond carpeting. Its properties would allow it to be used in the automobile industry and in the manufacturing of plastic housings for electronic equipment, two more product categories which severely burden our municipal waste streams. The nylon 6 story is a perfect illustration of what ecologically sound redesign can produce, if there were enough carrots and sticks to motivate more corporations to invest in it.

When EPR initiatives were initially explored here in the 1990s, industry effectively blocked their passage. Yet, ironically, many of corporations opposing EPR in the U.S. have managed to comply with these regulations in Europe, Australia, and Canada. Even European governments with conservative political agendas have embraced EPR, because it reduces taxes by lowering waste disposal costs, while adhering to the principles of the marketplace as the source of solutions for society's problems. Government may set standards and timetables, but private industry is free to determine the most cost effective ways to meet them. Furthermore, there's no reason that U.S. government couldn't subsidize efforts toward environmentally sound redesign, just as it traditionally has subsidized companies for the environmentally damaging exploitation of virgin resources like oil, gas and timber.

But what about the impact on consumer prices of redesigning and retooling to meet EPR regulations? Won't buyers end up paying? It's true that individual items may cost a little more as a result. But now we all end up paying, whether we buy a product or not, because of the escalating cost of municipal waste disposal. An EPR legislative initiative for electronic waste is currently under development in New York City, and one has been passed in Maine. If EPR makes sense to you, perhaps it's time to let government officials know that you want Massachusetts to be another state in the forefront of EPR legislation.

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