



Product Stewardship -- Who Takes out the Trash?

By [Alan Thein Durning](#)

One important but little-discussed difference between the Canadian and American parts of Cascadia is their different philosophies about trash. This difference has emerged in the last decade. And, sad to say, the Canadians have left the Americans in the dustbin, so to speak.

By embracing a concept called "product stewardship" or "extended producer responsibility," British Columbia has adopted a far less regulatory, government-centered approach, even while they've made dramatic gains in waste reduction and recycling.

The idea of product stewardship springs from posing an unfamiliar question: Who's responsible for products you buy when you're done with them? In other words, who takes out the trash?

The customary answer to that question is, "You do." But in practice, the answer has become, "local government."

Trash hauling has been a local-government responsibility since a century ago, when public hygiene depended on getting rubbish (and the rats and insects it fostered) out of town. But the composition of solid waste has changed radically in the past century, while responsibility for garbage has not. A century ago, urban wastes consisted mostly of ashes and biodegradable scraps such as food waste. Now, the solid wastes that Cascadian communities handle are overwhelmingly discarded consumer products and their packaging.

Product stewardship shifts responsibility for waste from government to those who design the products and packaging -- the manufacturers. Manufacturers have the largest

opportunities to reduce lifecycle environmental and health impacts, because the design phase of the product chain is the most critical to reducing waste.

In practice, product stewardship means that industries keep reuse and recycling in mind when planning products and they band together to create reuse and recycling systems. Retailers and industry-sponsored depots give rebates to consumers returning used goods covered by product stewardship, such as paint. Industry organizations collect and reuse or recycle the goods, often recouping the costs of collection by gaining a relatively "pure" stream of recyclables. The paint stream is all paint, for example, not the profusion of different substances currently brought to household waste sites in American Cascadia.

The history of product stewardship is fascinating, counterintuitive, and sometimes heartbreaking. The recycling boom of the late 1980s hit all of Cascadia about the same time: municipalities set up curbside recycling programs at the expense of taxpayers or utility ratepayers. By the early 1990s, British Columbia, like Washington and Oregon, had imposed small fees on certain hard-to-dispose consumer goods such as car tires and car batteries, which helped to pay for recycling or proper disposal.

But in 1993, British Columbia parted ways with the Northwest states. Rather than taking on responsibility for recycling an ever-longer list of consumer and business wastes, it embraced product stewardship. It began convening entire industries and assigning them the task of working out comprehensive systems for managing products throughout their lifecycles.

Government participated in the negotiations and continues to play a monitoring role but it doesn't collect the money or pay for the services. That's between the manufacturers of the goods and their consumers.

After a decade on this path, British Columbia has the most comprehensive list of products subject to such stewardship systems of any state or province in North America. It includes soft-drink containers, used oil, oil containers and filters, paints, solvents and flammable liquids, gasoline, domestic pesticides, pharmaceuticals, beer containers, and rechargeable batteries. "E-wastes" -- outdated electronic equipment -- is scheduled to join this list soon.

South of the 49th parallel, meanwhile, reuse and recycling efforts have progressed more slowly. Some municipalities have made progress with their curbside programs, but taxpayers and ratepayers have been left to cover the cost of handling used-up products and their packages. Producers have not taken on responsibilities commensurate to their role in generating waste, and advocates have been stymied in their attempts to hold producers responsible. The main obstacle: American industry has bigger political muscles than Canadian industry.

Look at the results: waste reduction and recycling in the states are done by the public sector. Waste reduction and recycling in the province are done by the private sector, or a growing share of it is. Ultimately, this means that British Columbia is getting the prices of goods to more accurately reflect their true, lifecycle costs -- such as the price of waste disposal and pollution clean-up. The users of specific products pay for more of the products' costs, rather than shifting the burden to all - taxpayers or ratepayers.

The shift to product stewardship -- and movements to advance it in the Northwest states and elsewhere in the United States -- is the topic of an [excellent paper](#) by the new [Product Policy Project](#). The paper is written by the project's director Bill Sheehan and its board president Helen Spiegelman. Helen lives in Vancouver, BC, and was long associated

with the Recycling Council of British Columbia, which has stood out as a continental leader on product stewardship.

Washington Citizens for Resource Conservation has more recently taken up the torch of product stewardship, promoting producer responsibility in the key e-waste sector and others. And the Northwest Product Stewardship Council, which represents government bodies, has also entered the field.

Politically, product stewardship is a fertile synthesis of approaches from the left and right. As Spiegelman and Sheehan write, "From a fiscal conservative perspective, EPR [extended producer responsibility] makes sense because it gets waste management off the tax base and it is based on the notion that the private sector is more efficient and effective than government-managed programs. Those of a more liberal bent support EPR because they believe that producers should have responsibility for pollution prevention."

Alan Thein Durning is executive director of Northwest Environment Watch, which publishes the [Cascadia Scorecard](#), a regional index of progress in health, the economy, population, energy, sprawl, forests and pollution. This column was first published in the [Cascadia Scorecard Weblog](#).