

Shifting the Trash Burden

Holyoke takes the lead in a campaign to reduce waste at the source--manufacturers.

Thursday, February 18, 2010

By Maureen Turner

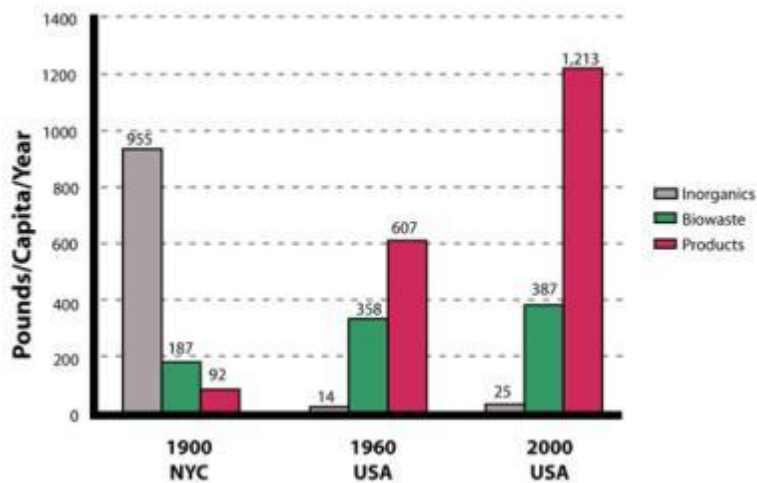


Chart showing how waste has changed radically

First, the good news: recycling rates in the U.S. are higher than they've ever been. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in 2008, Americans recycled or composted 83 million tons of the waste they generated—an average of 1.5 pounds per person per day. About one-third of the waste generated in the U.S. each year is recycled, up from 16 percent in 1990 and 6.6 percent in 1970.

But that still leaves an enormous amount of waste heading to strained landfills, incinerators and other waste disposal sites—the 83 million tons of trash that get recycled each year is overshadowed by the remaining 167 million tons that don't. EPA figures show that the majority of waste generated by Americans is made up of packaging and containers (30.8 percent), durable goods (18.3 percent) and nondurable goods (23.5 percent)—items that can be difficult, if not impossible, for consumers to recycle through their municipal waste systems.

Public and political pressure is building for a new approach to handling this waste, one that shifts the burden from consumers and municipalities to manufacturers, who would be forced to take responsibility for what ultimately happens to the products they make. Called "Extended Producer Responsibility," or EPR, the approach requires manufacturers to absorb the cost of collecting and

recycling their products—a shift, it's hoped, that would motivate them to make more environmentally friendly products in the first place.

The EPR model has been embraced by the European Union, which has taken a leadership role on the issue. In the U.S., it's catching on more slowly, with individual states adopting laws that address some, but not all, product categories. But as more and more regions face the prospect of running out of places to put their trash, momentum is building for a broader approach.

Earlier this month, the Holyoke City Council signaled its support for that effort, passing a resolution that calls for the state Legislature to pass a bill that would require electronics manufacturers to bear the cost of recycling their products. In addition, the resolution called for a broader statewide EPR program that would include many more products.

Holyoke is the first community in Massachusetts to call for a statewide EPR program.

"I thought the issue was tremendously appropriate for Holyoke," said City Councilor Rebecca Lisi, who sponsored the resolution. She sees it as an opportunity for the city to position itself to potential investors in the much-touted new "green economy"—and to save taxpayers money in the process.

Laws that hold manufacturers responsible for the "end life" of their products are not new. Perhaps the best-known examples are bottle laws, such as Massachusetts', that make beverage companies responsible for collecting and recycling used bottles. Massachusetts has a similar program for the disposal of products that contain mercury, such as thermometers and thermostats. Twenty states already have EPR laws for the disposal of electronics, or "e-waste."

Massachusetts is not one of them, which means towns and cities are responsible for the disposal of the roughly 300,000 computers, televisions and similar products disposed of in the state each year. Because TVs and computer monitors contain toxic metals, including lead, they've been banned from state landfills since 2000. Instead, municipalities hire private recyclers to handle those products. In total, Massachusetts communities spend about \$2 million to \$4 million a year to get rid of e-waste, the *Boston Globe* reported last year.

An e-waste bill is pending in the state Legislature. That bill, filed by state Rep. Frank Smizik (D-Brookline), received a favorable report from the Joint Committee on Environment, Natural Resources and Agriculture last fall and is now sitting before the House Committee on Rules. Holyoke is one of about 180 municipalities in the state that have called for that bill to come to the floor for a vote. (Valley communities that have passed similar resolutions include Amherst, Belchertown, Chicopee and Greenfield. The environmental group Clean Water Action is also calling on supporters to write to House Speaker Robert DeLeo to ask that the bill be brought to a vote.)

In December, in a preview of a forthcoming Solid Waste Master Plan, the Patrick administration announced its support for several waste reduction efforts, including the e-waste bill and an expansion of the bottle law to include water and sports-drink bottles.

"[T]he Patrick-Murray Administration is committed to an aggressive agenda of recycling and waste reduction that gives cities and towns assistance to expand and improve their recycling efforts and requires greater responsibility from manufacturers for products—ranging from water bottles to televisions—that end up in our waste stream," read a Dec. 11 announcement from the Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs.

"Focusing on incineration and landfills is the wrong end of the waste equation," EOEPA Secretary Ian Bowles added.

Lynn Pledger of Clean Water Action is excited by those kinds of statements from state officials, which she sees as an acknowledgement that we need to focus on how to reduce waste in the first place, rather than simply on how to dispose of it. She's also encouraged by the Patrick administration's emphasis on manufacturers bearing responsibility for their products.

Pledger would like to see Massachusetts broaden those efforts by creating a "framework EPR" system, one that would authorize state officials (in this case, the Department of Environmental Protection) to add new product categories to the program, rather than the current lengthy, piecemeal process that relies on the Legislature to pass individual laws addressing individual products. A handful of states are already considering framework EPR bills, including Maine. These efforts would require manufacturers to cover the cost of collecting and recycling their products and would subject them to performance standards set by the state.

That, Pledger said, would have an immediate benefit for municipalities, by relieving them of the burden of handling products that are difficult or costly to recycle. They would also have a longer term environmental benefit, she added.

"Once you make producers responsible for the cost of what happens to their products when they're discarded, that's going to influence how they design their product," she said. "They're going to design it to make it easier to recycle. If it has a toxic component, for example, they're not going to want to pay to dispose of that toxic waste, so they're going to find a safer alternative."

The three Rs of environmentalism—reduce, reuse, recycle—represent a hierarchy, Pledger said, one in which the preferred option is to not create potential waste in the first place. Even products that can be recycled come with environmental costs, in their manufacture, in their packaging, in the recycling process. EPR, she said, helps create "long product chains. & And along the way, you're focusing first on reusing things that don't have to be ground up and remanufactured."

If the drawn-out, contentious history of the bottle law is any indication, broader EPR legislation will face opposition from manufacturers, who are loath to accept government restrictions on how they do business, and typically insist that such mandates would cause them to pass the cost on to consumers, lead to worker layoffs, or prompt them to move to a more "business-friendly" place.

Those were some of the arguments made against the Holyoke resolution. The *Advocate* contacted three of the five Holyoke city councilors who voted against the EPR resolution, including Patty

Devine, chair of the Public Safety Committee, which had reported the resolution out without a recommendation; none responded to interview requests.

Rebecca Lisi described her colleagues' arguments against the resolution as based, in part, on concerns that the EPR movement would create "barriers for business" in a struggling city that could use more jobs and more tax revenue. In addition, some expressed concern that if manufacturers are forced to take on recycling costs, they'll pass it on to consumers by raising prices—a development that would be especially hard on poor people.

Pledger maintains that there are significant economic benefits that would come from EPR programs, including the creation of new jobs in the recycling and product repair sectors. They could also inspire companies to find smarter ways to make products, and to compete for the money of consumers who want safer products that won't just end up in a landfill.

"It stimulates innovations," she said. "Waste is basically inefficiency."

Lisi believes such a policy would lead to expanded recycling programs, which would create new employment opportunities. "That's where the big opportunity to create new jobs in the city comes from," she said.

As for poor people being unduly burdened by manufacturers passing on their costs, Lisi questioned whether those are the people buying high-end goods, like new televisions and computers. The working poor and other taxpayers, she added, are already picking up the cost for the city to handle disposed products.

"As a consumer, you can make a choice about which products to buy," Lisi said. "As a taxpayer, you're stuck in that community."

Last year, Holyoke was selected as the site of a new \$100 million computing center, a partnership between UMass, MIT, EMC Corp. and Cisco Systems. The center is being hailed as a "green" project because it will rely on hydroelectric power from the Connecticut River.

"There's a lot of grassroots buzz about how Holyoke can be the home of an industrial green revolution," Lisi said. "Even if it's with small, symbolic steps like this resolution, we need to start signaling to the state and the other investors who are watching what happens with this new computer center that we're ready to think green, act green, that we're going to be welcoming all sorts of green investment&

"We need to be proactive about marketing ourselves as a green city," Lisi continued. The EPR resolution, she said, will help get that message out throughout the state and beyond.