

May 25, 2009
COLUMNS

Opportunities arise during downturn

By Bill Sheehan

There has been a lot of coverage in Waste & Recycling News about the abrupt downturn in recycling markets. This is yet another symptom of the global recession. Obviously, there are many negative stories stemming from the current economic situation, but as we work our way through it, opportunities are presenting themselves to clean up wasteful spending and other fiscal shortfalls.

When our economy was flourishing, less thought was given to sustainability and frugality, and more thought was given to consumerism and upgrading. This shifted producers and consumers alike to accept a disposable lifestyle and society. Today, in the economic downturn, we are paying for this in more ways than one.

Local governments spend millions of dollars on waste management each year, and now zero-waste policies and diversion mandates have upped the ante and responsibility to deal with waste more effectively. This alone is a critical problem for local governments, but here is also where the opportunity has presented itself. A volatile economy teamed with personal desire to choose a more sustainable lifestyle offers a chance to leave behind the disposable society and launch a new "cradle-to-cradle" approach.

Fortunately for all the local governments trying to keep up with "greener" expectations and balanced budgets, a framework for less waste has already been designed and tested; it only needs to be implemented. The formula is called Extended Producer Responsibility, and it is already successful in Canada, Europe and Japan. The idea is now gaining a foothold in the United States, and a national movement is under way.

EPR ensures that local governments are no longer burdened with the costs of picking up garbage and recyclables. Instead, producers are made responsible for their products and packaging from the beginning design stages to end-of-life.

According to organizations like the Product Policy Institute, which is leading a campaign for the "EPR framework" approach, if producers are held financially responsible for ensuring that the products they sell are recycled, they will quickly redesign their products and packaging with a more "cradle-to-cradle" (vs. cradle-to-grave) plan in mind.

EPR policy gives producers incentives to design products for reuse, disassembly, repair and recycling.

In the process, this will stimulate innovation by producers making our manufacturers more globally competitive in a world market aligning around EPR policy. It will also invigorate the collapsed recycling industry and create new green jobs to handle the return, disassembly, repair and remanufacture of products formerly designed for disposal. Producers themselves will become "markets" for those materials, using them to make new products.

The drive for more green jobs is supported at the top of our country's administration. President Obama has said he wants to create as many as 5 million green-collar jobs. Although his broad focus is on energy, the holistic ideal of sustainability threads throughout his "New" New Deal.

On the home front, local governments in California, Oregon, Washington, Vermont, Texas and New York have organized product stewardship councils to lead the transition, and councils are being formed in other states as well. EPR legislation was considered this year in California, Washington and Oregon. The movement is under way. Consumer awareness and advocacy is another piece of the puzzle.

Supporting EPR supports sustainability, the economy, the environment and America's work force. For more about how you can get involved, visit www.productpolicy.org.

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(May 25 issue)