

Editorial Perspective



Do Americans need to look north?

As a magazine editor for nearly 30 years, I am continually intrigued with what are recycling's hottest topics at any given point. On far too many occasions, what intrigues me doesn't seem to resonate as strongly with others in the industry.

The most recent example is a brand new term in municipal recycling collection and processing: Full EPR. Let me explain on this page what this is and why

it should be among recycling's hottest issues.

Extended producer responsibility (EPR) is a management system for obsolete, recoverable products. In this scheme, the makers of these products have a financial and managerial responsibility to get the used items collected, processed and recycled. EPR is typically put into place through legislation.

The most widely known EPR systems are those now approved in about 20 states, and nearly every Canadian province, for the recycling of selected electronics, such as computers, televisions and monitors. Over half of Americans (55.1 percent) now live in states that have adopted the EPR approach for electronics. In these programs, such producers as Dell, Hewlett Packard, Sony and Panasonic must establish and maintain a recovery system in the state or province.

EPR is an approach that is being expanded quickly to other materials as well. For example, my home state of Oregon is the first state to use this concept for the recovery of post-consumer architectural paint.

Even with this rising interest, EPR has been limited to fairly small portions of the waste stream, and often to those portions that are hard to handle and recover (e.g., pharmaceuticals, paint, light bulbs, carpet, etc.). EPR in the U.S. doesn't target common residential recyclables, such as paper, metals and plastics. Can it?

The answer is yes, given the experience in several Canadian provinces, where the makers of the things that end up in the residential recycling stream (think Coke, Heinz, Procter & Gamble, etc.) must pay a portion of the local-government costs of collecting and processing these materials.

For example, half the cost of the massive residential recycling system in Ontario is funded by these companies. In addition, these producers – called stewards – have put up \$40 million (\$Cn) to fund local recovery system improvements, so that residents are provided cost-effective and efficient recycling service. I happen to sit on an advisory body that develops policies for the distribution of those funds.

And now, the Ontario Minister of the Environment has decreed that the stewards will soon be required to fund *all* of the costs of curbside recycling. Yes, all. In a few years, local governments will be reimbursed for the costs of collecting and handling recyclables.

One of municipal recycling's greatest barriers is that it costs money. City and county leaders are reluctant to spend more on recycling when they are being pressured to buy new fire trucks, repair school buildings, fix roads and aid the poor. Full EPR, as it's called in Ontario, provides a way to address this funding problem. And, I'm surprised that full EPR for residential recycling has not received more attention among recycling's most fervent advocates. You would think that governmental recycling officials would be very interested in taking a long, hard look at this option.

Jerry Powell

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