

County's program exemplary around new haz-mat bans

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Cost-cutting, hazardous-waste-reducing, championing reform in production of disposable consumer goods and their packages, and award-winning for all of the above.

That would describe Jim McHargue, who manages Amador County's solid-waste program, and the field referred to is an emerging one called "extended producer responsibility."

McHargue and his program won accolades Tuesday from the California Product Stewardship Council, a growing coalition - of which Amador County is a member - that aims at getting county governments out from under the expensive responsibility to dispose legally of hazardous wastes, such as paint.

"It's costing Del Norte County \$7,500 a ton to manage fluorescent lamps," coalition executive director Heidi Sanborn told Amador County supervisors.

Sanborn added that expense is far more than Del Norte can afford.

McHargue said after the meeting that Amador's costs also are extremely high.

"For example, for fluorescents and batteries, before the ban (on dumping these products) the cost was \$200 a year," McHargue said. "Now, we are disposing of them through contracting certified hazardous-waste contractors, and in the last four years, costs have doubled every year. It's currently \$9,000 a year for just those two."

Slowly, McHargue's program, others like his and responsive producers of consumer goods in key industries - such as those who make mercury thermostats and acid-filled auto batteries - are building a network that will reform the nation's current system. Model systems exist already in Canada and in Europe, McHargue said.

"Very soon, we'll be putting out containers for mercury-containing thermostats," McHargue said. "Manufacturers on their own have formed the Thermostat Recycling Corp. After deposit in the collection containers, thermostats are mailed back (to manufacturers) with no postage. It's like the Recycled Battery Corp."

Green jobs have been created at those corporations. The incentive is cost savings for manufacturers who needn't buy virgin materials, and in principle the method could work in virtually any product industry that produces waste now banned from landfills, according to Sanborn and McHargue.

A CPSC brochure reads in part, "A century ago, when local governments assumed responsibility for solid waste, it consisted mostly of coal ash left over from heating and cooking. The rest was mainly food, with a small amount of simple manufactured products like paper and glass. Today, manufactured products and associated packaging make up 75 percent of what we discard."

According to the CPSC, the need for extended producer responsibility derives from the following scenario, still current for the U.S. private-production system, but not for the Canadian or European approach to production.

"We currently operate under two separate systems. The front-end

system designs, manufactures and sells products to us and then

effectively rides off into the sunset. The back-end system is engaged once the consumer is done with those products. Local governments become financially responsible for managing the disposal of these private goods, many of which are toxic and disposable by design.

"These two systems don't communicate with each other," the CPSC account continues.

"Manufacturers don't have to design products to be nontoxic or recyclable, or design systems to safely dispose of them at the end of their usefulness. And local governments don't have any input into how toxic or durable the products are, but they still get stuck with the disposal bill."

Supervisors praised McHargue for his work.

For manufacturers to take responsibility for recycling their products, costs will have to be borne. But they are far less than costs to counties for the same disposal, and in addition to the offset of cost by avoiding expensive purchase of virgin material, the fact of being a "responsible producer" is a selling point and is advertisable in an increasingly green-conscious consumer market, Sanborn said.

Ultimately, the coalition wants pressure from consumers and county governments to force state legislation that will contain mandates around responsible producing, Sanborn said.



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