

EPA pushes material-management challenges

The agency is striving to increase cooperative projects with industry to conserve resources.

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In remarks before the Air and Waste Management Association this June, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Acting Assistant Administrator Thomas Dunne expressed his vision of a future filled with partnerships between EPA and the private sector designed to recycle and reuse "every major waste stream in the country, especially those wastes like biomass that can be converted to energy." While the goal is ambitious, it reflects a growing awareness of the value of managing materials better.

The umbrella for such efforts is the Resource Conservation Challenge (RCC). Created in September 2002, it aims to conserve resources through waste reduction, recycling and energy recovery. The RCC emphasizes a shift from "end of life" to "whole life" issues. One specific goal is to reduce the level of 31 so-called "priority chemicals" in all product lifecycle stages.

The RCC focuses six elements:

- **Product stewardship:** A core goal is for business to shift its orientation from waste management to product stewardship. The RCC strives to develop new markets for recycled, reused and beneficially reusable products and promotes product design that produces less waste with fewer chemicals. One example is the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool, which should lead to a rating and labeling system to ease identifying and purchasing of more environmentally friendly electronics by large institutional buyers, including the government, companies and universities.
- **Priority chemical reduction:** Through its Multimedia Pollution Prevention Forum, EPA has identified a group of 28 organic substances and three metals, cadmium, lead and mercury, as priority chemicals. The goal is to reduce by 50% the presence of priority chemicals in hazardous waste by 2005. Using a baseline set in 1991, this goal was met in 2001 when EPA achieved a 53% reduction. For 2008, the RCC is developing a new goal to reduce priority chemicals further in hazardous waste and expand the goal to all solid waste and releases to the environment. For instance, the National Waste Minimization Partnership Program works with industrial organizations, government agencies and local communities to find ways to help companies lower their generation of waste, particularly material that contains one or more priority chemicals.
- **Greening the government:** The RCC program promotes the purchase of "green" products through preferences and general guidelines that take environmental factors into account. A representative project is the GreenScapes Alliance, which encourages government agencies, businesses and others to make more "holistic" decisions about waste generation and disposal and the use of land, water, pesticides and energy in large-scale landscaping projects.
- **Beneficial use of materials:** Efficient materials management is a principal goal. For instance, the Industrial Waste Partnership and Coal Combustion Products

Partnership aim to spur generators and users of coal combustion products to increase the use of coal ash in highway and building construction products.

- **Energy conservation:** Saving energy also is a major goal. Using natural resources more efficiently and reusing waste more beneficially can conserve and produce energy. The WasteWise project, for example, is a partnership that promotes better materials management as a route to energy conservation. It fosters companies' use of recycle materials in their manufacturing processes.
- **Environmentally friendly design:** A key goal is designing buildings and products so they use and produce fewer chemicals. EPA's Green Buildings Lead by Example is a typical partnership project. It emphasizes healthy workplaces and buildings built in ways to minimize environmental impacts.

The Future

While Mr. Dunne's hope that virtually all waste streams will be the subject of an RCC partnership in the years to come may be optimistic, it is a laudable goal given the environmental and business benefits to be reaped by entities forgoing RCC partnerships. You should regularly monitor EPA's RCC web page (<http://www.epa.gov.epaower/osw/consERVE/index.htm>) to keep up-to-date on the many opportunities offered by this creative program.