

Painting a New Picture on Recycling Old Products

Ellie Leonardsmith

Usually when we throw our trash away, it's "out of sight, out of mind." But with the state landfill estimated to fill up in 24 years, some Rhode Islanders are focused on methods to reduce how much trash we're producing. "Producer Responsibility" is the name for a new waste management system that involves producers in the entire life cycle of products. Manufacturers then have an incentive to create products that are less toxic, easier to recycle and more durable. The system reduces waste disposal costs for municipalities and it just so happens to also be good for the environment and public health.

Rhode Island has already seen big changes as a result of producer responsibility laws. Thermostats formerly used mercury to help regulate temperature in indoor spaces, but when manufacturers started take-back programs in accordance with state law, they realized how expensive it was to dispose of mercury. Now thermostats are made without any mercury and less of this toxic metal is thrown out. This is good news for anyone who drinks water, eats fish or otherwise interacts with the natural world.

While producer responsibility advocates tend to focus on products that are toxic or hard to dispose of—mercury products, paint, mattresses, CFL light bulbs and medical sharps top the lists—legislation to deal with one product at a time can be inefficient. Each law may take between two to ten

years to pass. Thus, new legislation in Rhode Island, California, Oregon, Minnesota and Washington has put forth the concept of Framework Producer Responsibility. To streamline the process, the same general concepts can be applied to many consumer products, with stakeholder groups (consisting of industry representatives, waste management workers, Department of Environmental Management staff, and others) fleshing out the details.

Rep. Donna Walsh is the legislative champion for Rhode Island's Framework Producer Responsibility bill. She emphasizes the need to find a proactive solution to our waste predicament. "As we increasingly become more of a throw-away society, we must devise new methods of dealing with a waste stream that threatens our health as well as the capacity of the Central Landfill. Producer Responsibility is a mechanism to accomplish this purpose," she says.

Thirteen Rhode Island municipalities have passed resolutions in support of Framework Producer Responsibility for the state (Providence, Pawtucket, Cranston, Warwick, Woonsocket, Central Falls, Burrillville, Charlestown, Jamestown, Newport, North Kingstown, West Greenwich and Narragansett). These thirteen municipalities represent over half of the state's population, and include the interests of urban and rural, large and small, and higher- and lower-income areas of the state. Producer responsibility is good for almost



A small fraction of the mattresses collected for disposal by municipalities each day. Photo: Ellie Leonardsmith.

everyone.

The biggest worry for many manufacturers, of course, is that their costs will rise. But in many cases, industries have seen a change in business-as-usual that still allows for profits, albeit in a different manner. Paint companies such as MetroPaint, based in Oregon, have discovered that they can provide a service in which they take back consumers' used paint, turn it into a line of 10 colors and resell it. Consumers like the system because they no longer have to pay to bring their paint back (typical fees were \$5), paying instead a 35 cent charge when they purchase paint and bringing it back to their hardware store for free. Oregon's local governments like the system because they save money on the collection of a hazardous product. And, of course, MetroPaint likes the system because of the continuous flow of product reuse and profit.

Another success story lies with the recycling of mattresses. Municipal leaders will tell you that mattresses are one of the most troublesome and expensive products with which to deal, due to their size, weight (especially when wet) and disposal cost. Providence spent \$400,000 on the hauling and disposal of mattresses last year. Yet, the opportunities for recycling are promising. Ninety percent of a mattress can be recycled; and multiple mattress recycling facilities have been sited in New England in the past few years. Because the recycling must be done by hand, these businesses create new green jobs. Connecticut is even finding that certain businesses want to move to Connecticut because of the Producer Responsibility laws

there and the possibility for their businesses to prosper.

The Department of Environmental Management, which would be involved in deciding the order of products included and in convening the stakeholder groups, has been working with Clean Water Action and Representative Donna Walsh to prepare the legislation for the upcoming legislative session. Nicole Poepping, legislative liaison for the Department, says, "DEM is supportive of the Producer Responsibility approach to waste management for toxic and hard-to-dispose-of products. We have seen success in using this approach with electronic waste and products with mercury, and believe additional waste streams could be managed well through a producer responsibility program."

~ Ellie Leonardsmith is a community organizer for the Producer Responsibility campaign with Clean Water Action.

Go Deeper!

Find out more about our efforts at our website, www.cleanwater.org/ri.

Also check out the Product Policy Institute, dedicated solely to Producer Responsibility work: www.productpolicy.org



Old paint cans are just one of the products that can be addressed with the producer responsibility models. *Photo: Ellie Leonardsmith.*