



## Residential Environmental Management: Enviro-Shopping

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### Introduction

The average American generates more than 1,000 pounds of trash a year.

As a nation, we are producing an ever-increasing amount of garbage. Often called a throw-away society, Americans produce nearly twice as much waste as other developed countries. Our current rate of 160 million tons of trash per year could fill a convoy of 10-ton trash trucks 145,000 miles long - enough to circle the equator six times. Our trash production is also expected to increase approximately 20 percent by the year 2000. We all need to accept responsibility for lessening the amount of garbage produced and thrown away in order to avoid a crisis in the future.

Currently, the most common form of waste management is disposal in landfills. Approximately 80 percent of all waste ends up in the landfill. Another 10 percent of our waste is incinerated, and the remaining 10 percent recycled.

The problem is that landfills do not last forever; many are nearing or have already reached capacity. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to locate new sites for landfills.

Incineration is becoming increasingly important as space for landfills lessens. However, there are concerns involved in this activity, with most focusing on emissions from incineration and the health related impacts from the pollution.

We must find more appropriate ways to deal with the amount of waste we produce.

### Enviro-shopping

One way households can help assist in the war on waste is to engage in an activity called "enviro-shopping". Enviro-shopping means shopping with

care, concern, and commitment for the environment.

Enviro-shopping is characterized by five specific activities. These activities are referred to as the 5 R's: reduction, reuse, recycle, rejection and response. (Note: sometimes enviro-shopping will be defined using only 3 R's: reduction, reuse, and recycle).

### Reduction

Reduction involves cutting down on the amount of trash we generate in the household. This activity can be referred to as "source reduction". The Environmental Protection Agency defines source reduction as "the design, manufacture, and use of products so as to reduce the quantity and toxicity of waste produced when the products reach the end of their useful lives." At the household level, source reduction is accomplished by selective buying.

In order to reduce, we must be willing to give up some of the convenience we have become used to. While it may be difficult to reduce consumption, here are a few ideas to help get you started:

- Avoid any packaging labeled disposable. While the product contained may be convenient, it has a one way ticket to the landfill.
- Avoid items that are over packaged. Select only those products that have the least wasteful packaging. Reducing packaging not only saves on waste disposal, but also saves you money. One dollar out of every eleven dollars spent on groceries goes toward packaging. While packaging is important for the protection, preservation, and advertisement of a product, it also destroys resources and wastes energy used in its production and transportation.
- Avoid items that are unnecessarily boxed or displayed in blister packaging. An example of this may be deodorant packaged in a bottle and then enclosed in a box. An example of blister

packaging would be kitchen utensils or tools mounted on paperboard and surrounded by plastic wrap.

- Buy those items that you frequently use in bulk and avoid purchasing single serving containers. However, if the items are toxic or if you use them infrequently, buy only what you need or will use.
- Minimize the use of products with toxic ingredients. If you do have to use them, make sure you dispose of them properly.
- When possible, purchase concentrates.
- Bring your own tote bag to the grocery store or return paper bags for further use. While this custom may seem strange to most Americans, it is common practice in other countries.
- Buy only what you need. Try not to waste products or packaging.

## **Reuse**

Reuse requires that we learn to reuse packages and items instead of throwing them away. You can extend the life of an item by discovering a new use for it. The life of an item can also be increased by repairing or modifying it for use within the home.

Purchase items in refillable or reusable containers. Many food cooperatives allow their customers to bring their own containers for refill. Peanut butter, cooking oil, honey, flour, nuts, shampoo, as well as other products, often can be bought in this way. Look for those items with reusable dishes, or those that require you to use a dish of your own. Reuse bags, containers, boxes and other items. Using reusable products instead of their disposable equivalents reduces the amount of materials that end up as garbage.

## **Recycle**

Recycle involves recycling items and using recycled items in order to save our natural resources and lower our trash production. Recycling reduces the amount of waste that is buried in a landfill or incinerated. Recycling puts discarded material to valuable use, cutting down on litter and conserving natural resources.

When you are purchasing products and you can not find the item in a reusable or refillable package, then buy one made out of or packaged in a material that is recyclable in your community. It does not help the environment to purchase recy-

clable items if the item can not be recycled in Oklahoma. Remember, to fully participate in recycling, you must not only prepare items for recycling, but also purchase items made from recycled materials. To learn more about recycling, ask your local extension office for fact sheet T-4140 Residential Environmental Management: Recycling Household Wastes.

## **Rejection**

Rejection of items means that we will not purchase those products that can not be reduced, reused or recycled. Each time you decide to buy one product over another, you are sending a message to manufacturers and retailers.

## **Response**

Response encourages us to inform manufacturers and retailers about our unhappiness with products. When you have no choice but to purchase a product with excessive or unrecyclable packaging, write the manufacturer and suggest ways to improve the product. Speak to the store manager and let them know of the problem with the product. Change will occur when consumers begin to demand environmentally responsible behavior and products from manufacturers.

Many companies respond to public opinions and concerns. Let them know if you do not favor their policies. For example, if you see that a product you like is not available in a recyclable container, call or write the manufacturer and complain.

## **Product Labeling**

Research indicates that consumer awareness of environmental products is fairly high. Environmental advertising and labeling on products has been noticed by consumers. Some consumers, especially those who are environmentally active or aware, are likely to use this information to make purchase decisions. However, for many people, enviro-shopping can be made more confusing by the advertising and labeling of products. It is difficult to decipher all of the environmental claims made by product manufacturers.

Many products on the supermarket shelf are labeled with names such as environmentally friendly, recyclable, biodegradable and ozone-friendly. It is difficult to know which products are the best to buy and to determine which truly are what they claim to be.

While it is impossible to determine all the environmentally friendly products, there is information available to assist you. Following are two of the most common environmental claims, and some facts about each. Remember this information when you evaluate products, and you will be able to make a more informed decision.

**Ozone Friendly.** Many aerosol and polystyrene foam products claim that they are ozone friendly because they contain no chlorofluorocarbons (CFC). CFC's are harmful to the earth's ozone layer. This claim should not be given much weight because the United States government banned the use of CFC's in aerosols in 1978. About a decade later, polystyrene manufacturers began to voluntarily phase out the use of CFC's. However, some aerosols and foam products do contain other substances that can be detrimental to the environment. Some contain hydrocarbons which contribute to smog. Others contain trichloroethane or hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFC) which also damage the ozone layer.

**Biodegradable.** The claim of biodegradability may also be a problem for consumers. Over 80 percent of our waste goes to the landfill. Conditions in landfills are not ideal for biodegradation. Biodegradation is a process in which microorganisms' secrete enzymes break down materials chemically. There must be air, water, and light present in order for this process to occur because bacteria growth is affected by these substances. Unfortunately, these necessary elements are not usually present in today's landfills. About 50 percent of the food does degrade every 20 years; however, the remainder of the waste in landfills seems to keep its original weight, volume, and form even after 25 years in a landfill. Examinations of landfills have discovered paper, food, and yard wastes in easily recognizable form, even after being buried for years.

So, while a product may claim it is biodegradable, and it may biodegrade given the proper conditions, there is no guarantee that it will degrade, given our present method of waste disposal. Most experts agree that the best way of eliminating trash is not to produce it in the first place.

## Life Cycle Analysis

Life cycle analysis is an attempt to measure the full impact of a given product on the environment. Life cycle analysis takes into account the raw materials, manufacturing process, distribution, consumption, and disposal of the product. This

analysis has been used to try to determine if paper cups are better than polystyrene cups, and if cloth diapers are better than disposable diapers.

While life cycle analysis would appear to be a very good indicator of environmental impact, it is very costly and some experts believe the process is too complicated and others believe it is invalid. According to one source, "There are too many variables, too few hard data, too many opportunities for arbitrary assumptions and subjective biases to creep in, and no agreed-upon analytical methods" (Consumers Union, 1991). Instead of choosing products based upon a manufacturer's life-cycle analysis, it is better to choose products based upon their recycled content, recyclability and the amount of natural resources including energy used in making and using the product.

## Summary

Enviro-shopping is not an easy task. There are many variables that must be considered in the purchase of a product. In order to make wise decisions, we must all become informed consumers.

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