

Why Let Stewardship Get in the Way of a Quick Buck?

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By John Trotti

"Send recycled plastic to China...four days later it's back as air pollution." —UCLA Professor

It's time for us to take an honest look at recycling in the US, focusing attention on just what it is we're trying to accomplish in the light of environmental stewardship as well as societal needs. Allow me to air some thoughts here, so you can decide whether this is a worthwhile subject for scrutiny.

It's becoming more and more apparent that many recycled materials have no viable markets here—often, it is said, because of environmental concerns regarding their processing. And so instead of staying within our borders and under our control, they are shipped abroad beyond the reach of our environmental regulations and/or permissible practices (WTE for instance); thus their potential environmental impact is not mitigated but merely shifted overseas.

For example, discarded plastics are processed and then sold for around \$0.21 per pound abroad, where routinely they are burned for their energy value in combustors of dubious pollution prevention capability. Not surprisingly, there's the small matter of air pollution borne on the north temperate zone's prevailing west-to-east winds, in some cases coming to roost in its place of origin...a fitting climax, all things considered.

This in itself would seem to be reason enough to question the wisdom of the proposition, but wait...there's more.

It takes about 12 barrels of oil to make one ton of polyethylene, which at today's going rate amounts to something in the neighborhood of \$115 each...so let's do some math.

We take a commodity—oh, you don't like the word?—OK, a recycled material with a value on the local market of \$1,380 and sell it abroad for \$0.21 per pound (\$420 per ton). Does this sound a bit strange? Don't worry...it gets stranger still.

After the discarded water- and pop bottles [on which advance disposal fees were deposited at point-of-purchase] have been collected, sorted, compacted, baled, and containerized at the ratepayers' expense,

the freight is now moved by surface transport to one of several seaports, where longshoremen stage and load it aboard cargo vessels for shipment across the bounding main to customers whose major challenge lies in how long it will take to off-load the recycled material and commoditize it through the simple expedient of burning it for its caloric value.

Am I hallucinating this? Does the idea of giving up \$960 worth of a valuable commodity—one whose strategic significance ranks right up there with the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction—make sense somewhere or somehow? Well if you are so steeped in your belief that burning fuel for American energy is bad, then shipping it to an economic competitor who intends to put it to the torch with no pretense of environmental concern beyond a little rhetoric, makes excellent sense.

Is this what you and I had in mind when we supported rising tide of environmentalism back in the 1980s and '90s, or were we mistaken in viewing the hierarchy as a means of forwarding and rewarding stewardship? I don't think so, but let's look at where a decade-and-a-half has gotten us in terms of true stewardship. On the positive side of the ledger, we are diverting a far higher percentage of our wastes away from our landfills, and we have seen a growing acceptance to the use of recycled materials in a variety of products. So, too, have we seen an increase in the public participation in recycling activities and the apparent success of recycling mandated targets. But are these the real measures of stewardship?

I don't know how much faith you and I should place in diversion figures from around the nation, but supposing they're accurate, how germane are they if we've relinquished the ability to participate responsibly in their return to the world of commerce? To me that's the real issue, and I'm not sure those responsible for the supposed success of recycling really want to know the answer.

I've done my spouting. Now I'd like to hear from you. By the time you read this, the overhaul of our Web site will be complete, and a new, improved, and far more interactive www.mswmanagement.com will be up and ready for you to come and wade in on this or any other topic that gets your blood circulating.

See you there.

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