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A close look at product stewardship

By Jake Thomas, Resource Recycling

The idea that companies should be responsible for end-of-life management of their products has steadily picked up steam as more states adopt producer responsibility laws and industries launch initiatives to recover their wares at the end of their useful lives. But any of these plans has many moving parts that sometimes collide with each other. A panel of individuals on the frontlines of this issue shed some light on what might lay ahead during last week's Resource Recycling Conference in Austin, Texas.

Dave Galvin, hazardous waste program manager at Washington state's King County and the board president of the Product Stewardship Institute, kicked off the session by asking if a mandatory approach to product stewardship better than a voluntary.

He then asked another question: "Is this the right question to be asking, or should we really be focusing on results?" he said.

Carl Smith, CEO of the battery recycling organization Call2Recycle, came down more on the side of voluntary programs. Call2Recycle was formed in 1994 by battery companies seeking to pre-empt emerging state and federal regulation of spent re-chargeable batteries. Eighteen years later, Call2Recycle has 30,000 collection points in the U.S., handles tens of millions of pounds of batteries annually and has been largely successful in staving off state mandates.

"From that standpoint, we've been tremendously successful. But the tide has changed," said Smith, noting that some Canadian provinces have launched battery recycling requirements and New York State has enacted what he called a very flawed battery recycling law.

Smith said that if just a few large states had stewardship laws for re-chargeable batteries, it could bring "free riders," or companies who don't participate in voluntary recycling schemes like Call2Recycle, into the fold.

"If there was absolutely no threat of regulation, I think that at least some of those manufacturers wouldn't need to incur the expense of participating," he said.

He also said that anti-trust laws that bar companies from cooperating with each other could be a significant barrier to getting stewardship organizations off the ground.

In the end, increasing recycling of re-chargeable batteries comes down to change in consumer behavior, he said.

"I don't think that a bunch of manufacturers getting together are going to be any more successful in changing consumer behavior than a state government trying to change consumer behavior," said Smith.

Walter Alcorn, vice president of environmental affairs for the Consumer Electronics Association, took a different tack. There are currently 28 states with some sort of e-scrap law, which have different requirements. This situation, said Alcorn, creates compliance hassles for electronics manufacturers who have to adjust their operations for requirements in each state. A better approach, he said, would be a national electronics recycling law that would make it easier for companies to incorporate their stewardship requirements into their business plans.

"We believe this national problem should have a national solution," he said.

He said that the fact that 28 states already had e-scrap laws in place almost amounted to a shortcoming by the electronics industry. "You never want to have someone else driving solutions for your industry," he said.

However, he did say that there was room for voluntary initiatives, pointing out that his organization was working to increase opportunities for consumers to recycle their electronics and is working with others on sponsoring more than 7,500 permanent collections sites nationwide.

Garth Hickle, product stewardship team leader at the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, wrapped up the session by saying that the key challenges facing voluntary efforts are lack of accountability and transparency, broad participation, transition from competition to cooperation and if it's a real commitment from the industry or just an "anti-regulatory" tactic.

He said that a few industries have had some success in leading the charge for stewardship of their products, such as the carpet industry. He also said that while Call2Recycle might have been motivated by preventing new regulations, it has accomplished some good things.

"On the face of it, that sounds problematic," he said of the original motives behind Call2Recycle. "But the infrastructure that [Call2Recycle] put in place was a substantive effort."



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