

Opinion: Recycling program threatens papers

Environment: New regulations turn control over to major corporations, most of which are based in Toronto

BY PETER KVARNSTROM, SPECIAL TO THE VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 16, 2014



Local blue box recycling programs are working well, but the province has decided to turn recycling over to an industry group to shift responsibility to producers. This is bad news, particularly for newspaper publishers, who will have to pay more.

British Columbians have every right to be proud of our world-leading recycling program, built right here in this province. The achievement of the mighty Blue Box is the product of an efficient partnership between municipal governments, the private sector, and the people of British Columbia. It gets the job done and, at an average cost of \$35 per household each year, it gets the job done at a good price.

So, if the system for recycling waste packaging is working so well, why is the province so keen to “fix it” and hand it over to the very multinational corporations that shipped us all that packaging in the first place?

Sounds remarkable, but that is exactly what is happening. On May 19, the government’s new multi-material recycling regulation will formally end the days of local decision-making over our Blue Box programs and hand it to some of the world’s largest producers of plastic and paper packaging. Recycling will then be controlled by companies such as Procter & Gamble, Coca-Cola, Walmart and Unilever Canada.

Critical decisions about the province’s recycling program will no longer be made by elected representatives who live in the communities those programs serve, but instead by a group made up almost entirely of Toronto-based executives of multinational companies who will decide who will pay how much for the privilege of collecting and processing your recyclables. What is going on here?

The consequence will be a dramatic increase in costs for British Columbia's businesses, particularly the province's newspapers. In fact, we estimate that the newspaper industry is threatened with a bill that could come to \$14 million. That is a dramatic increase when you consider that newspapers aren't required to pay product stewardship fees today, directly. Newspapers, like all businesses, pay for these services the same way all British Columbians do: through their property taxes.

That doesn't mean newspapers haven't been participating in recycling and the environment, far from it. In fact, newspapers are the original recycled product and publishers have taken steps, such as moving to vegetable-based inks, to minimize the environmental impact of our product. Diversion rates for newsprint are a remarkable 85 per cent, already well above the government's own target. The government's new recycling regulation wouldn't do a thing to improve newspapers' already impressive recycling record.

What it will do, however, is dump a massive new cost onto the back of a fragile industry still challenged to stay standing. While our readership is stronger than ever, British Columbia's newspapers are struggling financially.

Sadly, every single newspaper, from large regional dailies to the smallest community weekly, in every part of the province, will be impacted. Indeed, there is no greater threat to the vibrancy of British Columbia's newspaper industry today than the new recycling policy. Think about that for a minute while enjoying your next read. It is your daily newspaper, your community weekly, that is at risk here.

But the new recycling regime will not only cause a wave of damage and job losses across newsrooms everywhere, it will also have an impact on many other businesses, as well as thousands of municipal jobs that will be put at risk with the loss of local decision-making for our recycling programs.

And, don't believe for a minute that this will somehow help B.C. families. The reality is that these costs will be passed on to consumers, who will now pay for the cost of recycling every time they have a box of pizza delivered, pick up a carton of milk, or buy a roll of toilet paper.

The Toronto-based multinational companies behind the program are gambling away the success of the Blue Box in favour of an experiment in something they like to call "extended producer responsibility."

Under this new program, decisions about nearly every aspect of our recycling system will be handed over to a small group of big businesses based thousands of kilometres east of the Rockies. I suspect this will alarm the people of British Columbia.

Peter Kvarnstrom is chairman of the Canadian Newspaper Association and a B.C. newspaper publisher.

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