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# Province eyes a solid waste alternative to incinerators

BY NICOLE STEFENELLI, VANCOUVER SUN    AUGUST 3, 2011

On July 25, Metro Vancouver officials breathed a sigh of relief with the long-awaited provincial approval of their solid waste management plan.

From the initial drafting of the plan, to the year it spent in limbo on the environment minister's desk and the ensuing controversy now playing out with its approval, incineration, also known as "waste to energy," has long been the point of contention and the only issue to really catch the media and public's attention.

I believe, however, that a much more significant solid waste policy decision was made last May, one that went virtually unnoticed by the media and public.

On May 19, the provincial government amended the provincial recycling regulation, placing packaging and printed paper under the umbrella of Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR.

Although not as hot a topic as burning trash, the implications of this change for both the environment and the people of British Columbia dwarf those of any incineration project.

EPR is a different approach to managing solid waste and recycling.

Canadian environment ministers have officially defined it as an environmental policy approach in which a producer's responsibility for a product is extended to the post-consumer stage of its life cycle.

Currently in B.C., municipal and regional governments are in charge of operating and funding residential solid waste and recycling systems.

They fund these programs using revenue collected via property taxes or solid waste utility fees. The onus is therefore on taxpayers to finance the recycling or disposal of the packaging and paper that producers create.

With EPR now covering all packaging and printed paper products, we will see significant changes. Financial responsibility for recycling services will be transferred from cities and taxpayers at large to the producers of the packaging and printed paper products that end up in our blue boxes and garbage cans. Because much of this added cost will then find its way into product prices, those who generate more waste will end up paying more, unlike the flat-rate all-you-can-throw-away buffet they enjoy now.

And the impact of EPR will not end with the wallet. Because it is provincial-level regulation, the affected materials will be the same throughout B.C. For one, this means that every resident with a blue box will be able to put the same materials in it - and likely a much greater diversity of materials at that - rather than the city-by-city hodgepodge that exists now. There is also the potential for standardization in terms of the number of streams in which recyclables are collected, which could have huge consequences for cities with long-established triple, dual and single-stream recycling programs.

Most significant, however, are the environmental implications of EPR. Although much is still unknown about the details of how it will all work, environmental incentives will be built into the fees that producers have to pay to deal with the waste from their products. For example, these incentives may be designed to make it more cost-effective for producers to use less packaging, to switch to more easily recycled types of packaging, and to otherwise redesign their products with waste and recycling in mind.

If the incentives are well-designed, the result will be a dramatic reduction in the amount of waste created in the first place, both in B.C. and beyond. The fact that a B.C. regulation alone could have such expansive environmental impacts is quite incredible. I believe that any effects of an incinerator or two pale in comparison.

Producers have until November 2012 to come up with a plan for how this new system will work. Implementation is set for May 2014, right around the same time shovels will likely hit the ground for the new incinerator.

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