

## Zero Waste Institute Newsletter for February 2012

After a long lapse without a newsletter, an article in the San Jose Mercury News got my goat and I just had to send out something about it.

Alameda County, which covers a good portion of the eastern side of the Bay Area of California, has embarked on one more campaign for the destruction of valuable resources and it shouldn't remain buried in ignorant public acceptance. Someone has got to point out how limited their thinking is.

This is the same county that pioneered the funding of recycling by placing a surcharge on every ton of garbage disposed of in an Alameda County dump. It isn't as though recycling could ever be a threat to the torrent of garbage flowing into the dump. Actually recycling increases that torrent because the garbage companies use recycling as greenwash to justify making lots of garbage on the excuse that "it will be recycled". But still, somewhere back in the heady, olden days when recycling was green, when the recycling movement was starting out and bright eyed environmentalists had some notions of recycling being an alternative to dumping, there is that notion of a conflict, a tension, between recycling and dumping. Call me nostalgic, but it sure would be nice if the Alameda County Recycling Agency didn't do everything in its power to convince the recyclers that increased dumping flows means more money for them. Nostalgia dies hard.

Anyway, like the greedy butchers of old, now Alameda County has reached out its fat thumb to place it square on the scale of destruction of still one more valuable resource. They have latched on to the current discussions of excess pharmaceuticals to make sure that destruction is going to become the only possible fate for an excess bottle of pills.

They plan to pass a law that manufacturers of pills have to reach out to Alameda County and pay the cost to collect and destroy any pharmaceutical that a citizen decides he can't use, or doesn't want to use. Really it's just a ploy to shift costs to manufacturers and away from the county, But the result is that destruction will be the only possible fate.

I have spent a good deal of effort to explore possible alternative fates for excess pharmaceuticals. Take a look at [http://zerowasteinstitute.org/?page\\_id=1000](http://zerowasteinstitute.org/?page_id=1000) for the beginnings of a discussion of some more thoughtful solutions. As always, I just try

to salt the mine of ideas. I don't have the last idea on the subject, but I do have some initial thoughts to get the pot boiling and to show that there are ways to think about reuse that can shift the discussion away from disposal and destruction.

Why is this important? Because drugs are very complex molecules which require huge investments in factories, researchers, scientists, exotic raw materials and capital expenditures to produce. Every molecule cavalierly destroyed that could have been reused means that somewhere in the world, a pharmaceutical company must crank up this ponderous, profligate mechanism to recreate the missing drug. Sure, they are happy to sell more product. But the planet groans.

What this new destructive urge represents is the ugly side of what has come to be known as EPR – Extended Producer Responsibility. This new version of magical solutions to garbage claims that if we force manufacturers to take back all of their used commodities, somehow, and it is never specified how, reuse will be the outcome. This pernicious idea has been embraced by the garbage companies and it joins the pantheon of magical ideas for “eliminating garbage” along with recycling, separating into fractions, incinerating, burning for steam or electricity and filling up the Grand Canyon.

I have long criticized EPR as being nothing more than an enforced disposal technique. After all, if some manufacturer or his distributor is forced to get in a truckload of broken up VCR's or cellphones, what suggests he would suddenly get religion and try to find a way to reuse the garbage? In the real world, he will make a contract with a garbage company to take away the goods and dump them.

And now we have the proof dear reader. Here is one of the first true EPR programs and what does it do? It enshrines destruction over all other possibilities.

Yes, garbage! The Real World! Isn't it wonderful?

Read the article at: [http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci\\_20065618](http://www.mercurynews.com/breaking-news/ci_20065618)

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