THE PRO-MANUFACTURING ENVIRONMENTALIST …or where your material goes after you've 'recycled' it

Article by Steve Lautze

[This is a reprint of an article that appeared in the Sierra Club Bay Chapter *Yodeler* newsletter in November/December, 2005 – see it online here: http://sanfranciscobay.sierraclub.org/yodeler/html/2005/11/feature10.htm]

Most Americans "recycle", that is, participate in programs collecting recyclable materials. It makes them feel good, and it should. But true recycling requires more than just collection; other essentials are processing and, most importantly, conversion (ideally locally) into a new product.

Most of the material collected at your home goes to a materials recovery facility for further processing, usually involving dirty and difficult labor by sorters who pull marketable materials out by hand, typically leaving 3 - 10% *unrecyclable* residue, largely plastic and contaminated paper.

Does it matter if recyclables are processed in Asia?

Some see it as inevitable, given international economic disparities, that our scrap materials go offshore for additional processing and manufacture into finished goods. In fact, most of the recyclable paper, metal, and plastic collected in Northern California is exported via the Port of Oakland to other Pacific Rim countries such as China, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand. U.S. scrap materials are the primary raw materials for these economies, which export many finished goods back to the U.S. Some recovered materials are too heavy (per unit of value) to export, including glass, organic materials, and construction and demolition debris.

Others suggest that development of domestic industries to process and remanufacture collected materials would be more truly sustainable. This approach would reduce the environmental costs of transporting materials, and would force each country to take responsibility for the pollution potential of its own wastes—in particular electronic waste, which is expanding rapidly (largely due to "planned obsolescence"), and today is often exported and re-processed under conditions which are hazardous to the workers, and also foul the environment.

Manufacturing is undervalued in the U.S. today. It is viewed as dirty, anachronistic, or unsightly. Some suggest the U.S. is now a "post-industrial" nation destined to have an information and service economy. It is also tempting to think of an economy or ecology being more sustainable in the absence of

industry and its inherent environmental impacts. Our consumer culture focuses on the acquisition of manufactured goods, but there seems to be a convenient disconnect between the factory and the glitzy retail outlet. Leaders speaking up for the retention and nurturing of U.S. manufacturing are derided as protectionists opposed to "free trade". Many environmentalists tend to focus on the local negative aspects of "industry", putting even recycling-based manufacturers in an awkward position when they seek to expand or site facilities. But if we merely export our share of the pollution associated with industry, we are not building a sustainable or a just world.

California is a huge market for finished products, but has high costs for land, labor, energy, and worker's compensation and has high (ergo costly) environmental standards. As a result, the country's most populous state—at once the state with the greatest consumption and a bellwether of environmental protection legislation—has relatively few manufacturing facilities. For example, we have only one steel mill (in Southern California).

Should environmentalists care about the retention and creation of blue-collar jobs? Cities and developers favor retail, office parks, and housing over growth or even retention of industrial uses. These other uses bring cities more sales and property taxes. We worry about underfunded and malfunctioning schools, but less often about the dearth of manufacturing and other blue-collar work that can provide decent wages for residents lacking higher education.

California —
lots of people, little manufacturing

As we champion goals such as Zero Waste and Manufacturer Responsibility, should we allow these to drive manufacturing to other locations, or should we also advocate a "Responsibility to Manufacture"? Does it matter that a city, region, or state consumes much more than it produces, and if so, how can we strike a better balance? Environmentally sound manufacturing can be challenging, especially when using recycled materials, and so perhaps we should offer more incentives—not just mandates—for responsible manufacturing. In other words, support for true recycling requires support for a healthy manufacturing sector.

Recycling is not just a way to reduce landfilling, but is a cornerstone of a more sustainable long-term economy. Two recent studies have shown that even today recycling and affiliated manufacturing industries rival the domestic auto industry in overall economic impact. With raw materials from domestic forests and mines increasingly unavailable, does it not make sense to quest for a more truly sustainable regional manufacturing and composting economy in the greater Bay Area?

Such an approach requires integration of recycling infrastructure into smart growth and other land-use policy. We need to plan for regional "green" industrial capacity that is not smothered by NIMBYism or excessive operating costs.

When we were mired in the "throwaway society", a city needed just one or two big pieces of land for its wastes: the landfill itself, and maybe a transfer station for sorting the garbage and transferring it into larger trucks. As we move to a Zero Waste future (see article, page 8), each region will need enough industrially zoned real estate for intensive collection, processing, and remanufacturing of the materials diverted from the landfill. Most of these recycling-based businesses will continue to be privately owned, but provision for such enterprise has an essential public purpose, akin to essential utilities such as wastewater treatment and power generation. Ideally, this green-industrial sector will recycle all the materials we use in our daily lives. At a minimum, however, we need to accommodate facilities to handle the bulkiest materials not suitable for export, especially organics and construction and demolition debris. Siting such facilities can be a huge challenge, as evidenced by the current controversy over a proposed composting facility in Sunol.

True recycling may require recycling our attitudes towards industry and land use.

The Northern California Recycling Association (NCRA) has prepared a 17-minute documentary video, "Point of Return: Oakland's Place on the Pacific Rim", about planning for a sustainable, Zero Waste infrastructure. To find out more about the video (including upcoming local screenings), or to obtain your own DVD copy ($12 including shipping and handling), contact NCRA at: http://www.ncrarecycles.org or (510)217-2433.

Steve Lautze works on sustainable economic-development projects for Oakland, and is the coordinator of the Oakland/Berkeley Recycling Market Development Zone (RMDZ). He is also president of the California Association of RMDZs, past president of NCRA, and a member of the Bay Chapter's Solid Waste and Recycling Committee.