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Official: EPA needs to change focus

By Joe Truini

KANSAS CITY, MO. — The federal government needs rewrite its environmental policy, and this post-election period may be the perfect time.

Writing and enforcing waste disposal regulations should no longer be the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's top priority. Instead, it needs to switch gears and actively pursue reuse and recycling.

After almost 30 years of a "command and control" system of regulating solid waste disposal, the federal government needs a dramatic policy makeover, said Thomas P. Dunne, acting assistant administrator for the EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response.

"Presidential elections have a way of freeing up minds and loosening lips," he said.

Dunne spoke Nov. 8 at the 2004 Byproducts Beneficial Use Summit in Kansas City. The meeting was organized by the EPA. Waste News handled marketing of the conference.

"I'm convinced this country must make a sharp and profound change in policy direction," he said. "Things have got to change."

The EPA has to become a different kind of agency, focusing primarily on material reuse and recycling rather than regulation, Dunne said.

"It's a wholesale change and I think we're ready," he said. "And I think we can do it."

The 1976 Resource Conserva-

tion and Recovery Act charged the EPA with overseeing the safe disposal of solid waste and encouraging energy recovery from recycled materials.

The agency needs to concentrate its resources on the second part, developing a national materials management policy instead of spending the lion's share of its energy writing regulations, Dunne said. A new policy could create an EPA Office of Waste and Materials Management, which would develop and oversee the program.

"EPA's days of composing and writing waste disposal regulations is just about over," he said. "That job's mostly done."

It's not a matter of if the agency's focus will shift, just a matter of when, Dunne said.

"This is not something that we can say, 'Well, we'll implement it in three or four years,'" he said. "This thing has got to be structured and start putting in place in a short period of time while we have the momentum started."

The seeds have been planted in the form of EPA programs such as the Resource Conservation Challenge and WasteWise, Dunne said.

"What we've got to do in the whole reuse arena is to pick up the pace and pick it up rather

dramatically," he said. "We're not going far enough, fast enough."

The EPA and state environmental agencies must engage industry, environmental groups and third-party scientific institutions, such as universities and testing agencies, to encourage the reuse of industrial byproducts.

"For manufacturers everywhere, materials management will become a much higher priority than waste management," Dunne said. "I think it's safe to say that most companies see waste disposal as a cost of doing business, and EPA has been adding to that cost of doing business."

It doesn't make long-term economic sense to use materials once and throw them away, he said.

"The fact is, there is probably bigger potential for environmental and economic safety by going into prevention and reuse than it is continuing to sit around and handle the waste-disposal element," Dunne said. "Waste generators will also have to embrace the realities of this new paradigm."

Most business resources in the environmental arena are spent on compliance, said James L. Richardson II, manager of Ford Motor Co.'s Heritage Project. He agreed the EPA needs to adjust its focus and spend more time encouraging businesses to reuse and recycle byproducts rather than regulating their disposal.

"I thought that was a very

good comment on his part and certainly, from at least my personal perspective, where this needs to go," Richardson said. "I think this needs to go to make sustainable solutions really a good business and a good environmental strategy."

The Heritage Project is the \$2 billion renovation of the almost 90-year-old Ford Rouge Center in Dearborn, Mich. The company set out to transform the facility into a model of sustainable manufacturing.

The site includes several advanced environmental technologies, including the world's largest living green roof, some 500,000 square feet.

Dunne has yet to make his case to EPA Administrator Mike Leavitt, but the administrator is on board with the idea, he said. The strongest arguments may be made to Congress and the Federal Office of Management and Budget. Without their support, the EPA's budget may continue to shrink along with its effectiveness.

"I think that, if we don't do it, the survival of parts of the organization are going to be at risk," he said. "That'll get everybody's attention."

An EPA policy change will not put the agency out of the business of regulating and enforcing, Dunne said.

"The regulatory program will not go away," he said. "It can't."

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