

Don't dump this program, by David Suzuki, Citizen Special, August 5, 2010

Ontario's government must resist calls to scrap its policy of making polluters pay for hazardous waste

Nobody, not the opposition, not the government, not the media, should stand in the way of one of the best ideas to come to Ontario in a long time.

Call it Extended Producer Responsibility, call it Eco Fees, call it what you'd like, but the bottom line is that hazardous substance manufacturers understand one thing best: if it costs them to pollute they're going pollute less -- often a lot less.

That's the fundamental principle underlying Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies such as the government of Ontario's Household Hazardous Waste Program -- a program the official opposition has inexplicably threatened to tear down if it gets the opportunity.

While the implementation of "eco fees" last month was badly mishandled by Stewardship Ontario and retailers, causing a public uproar, Ontario's hazardous waste program is vitally important for the province, and can be a model for the rest of the country. Both environmentally and financially, it is the way of the future. Which means the Tories' threats constitute nothing more than crass political opportunism.

It's always disappointing to see this type of behaviour rear its head in politics. Again and again, we've seen political opportunism put before sound environmental policy, be it the carbon tax in British Columbia or the federal Green Shift proposal.

In this case, the opposition's approach is deeply flawed for two fundamental reasons. Dismantling the Household Hazardous Waste Program means that municipal property taxpayers will be on the hook for the lion's share of the cost of dealing with household hazardous waste. Asking taxpayers to subsidize the manufacture and purchase of environmentally unfriendly products is fundamentally misguided; it makes people who do not use these products pay for their environmental impact.

In addition, by forcing taxpayers to pick up the tab, the incentive to eliminate or reduce the environmentally hazardous aspects of a product is lost in one fell swoop. Not only does this create a vicious circle of even more hazardous products, but it demonstrably lowers the rate of waste diversion and increases the pace at which more pollutants enter our landfills, air and water.

The life cycle of a product typically has an enormous impact on the environment, ranging from contribution to landfills and incinerators, energy consumption and chemical emissions, to the mass consumption of finite natural resources.

Extended Producer Responsibility is based on the "polluter pays" principle. It encourages manufacturers to consider all possible environmental implications of a product at each stage of its life cycle -- and to form integrated, environmental management strategies to

ultimately recover, recycle or even reuse their products once they are no longer of use to the consumer.

The cost of recovery and disposal can then be incorporated into the cost of the product. As only manufacturers can change their product design, they are the most efficient target for the achievement of Extended Producer Responsibility.

Through the introduction of these forward-thinking policies and programs, there is the potential for business, the environment and communities to benefit. Manufacturers benefit from increased cost-efficiency of production through the use of durable recyclable or reusable product parts, and therefore decreased energy and virgin material consumption, which improves competitiveness.

The environmental benefits include reduced natural resource consumption, the removal of toxic chemicals and hazardous material from the air, land and water, and decreased pressure on landfills.

Communities benefit from the fact that the cost of consumer waste is no longer borne by society as a whole, and from the creation of new recycling businesses and jobs.

As he stated last week, Ontario's environment commissioner, Gord Miller, supports the Household Hazardous Waste Program as a major step forward toward the better management of hazardous waste materials that we don't want impacting the environment. In his recent report to the legislature he described the program as a fundamentally good plan that should be improved, not scrapped.

Now the opposition wants to come along and upset the entire apple cart. Just as the government of Ontario is on the path to a world-leading hazardous waste diversion policy.

It is hard to believe that in this day and age, this time of unchecked oil spills and hot global warming summers, some still have the temerity to suggest that Ontario go backwards -- because that's what the official opposition is saying -- rather than moving forward with cleaning up our act and making the polluters pay.

In many instances Ontario has already shown that it can lead the world on environmental policy and technology. To take a step backward now, when it comes to hazardous waste, would quite simply be rubbish.

David Suzuki is a scientist, broadcaster, author, and co-founder of the David Suzuki Foundation.