

THE NIAGARA FALLS REVIEW

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Ontario's new eco-fees have the environment in mind

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With all the hype about the HST kicking in July 1, eco-fees snuck in virtually unnoticed. But it didn't take long for them to garner the same critical reviews as the newly imposed tax -- even with the word "eco" in their name.

Eco-fees cover the cost of recycling for Ontario's Municipal Hazardous Special Waste Program, including the new Orange Drop program that manages waste from 22 types of household containers.

Companies, or "stewards," that produce or distribute products like aerosol cans, batteries and pharmaceutical products must now pay a fee based on the amount of materials they put into the marketplace.

Collection, transportation and processing hazardous waste are covered by the companies that distribute the products. Steward fees are used to improve and support collection programs and manage collected materials in an environmentally responsible way.

Stewardship Ontario -- an agency regulated by the government -- manages the program and promises to use every cent levied from stewards to pay for the program that helps divert waste from the landfill. It does not dictate whether the companies absorb the cost themselves or pass the buck to retailers who may, in turn, show a fee at the point of sale.

The only fees that Stewardship Ontario has any control of, however, are those levied on stewards.

So when it comes to non-rechargeable batteries, for example, stewards would be on the hook for 76 cents per kilogram, while fees that consumers may see at the checkout can vary.

Stewardship Ontario has provided a list of estimated ecofees that consumers may pay for products at the checkout, such as six cents for a four pack of AA batteries or 14 cents for one fluorescent bulb, but the actual fees are determined by the manufacturer or retailer.

Consumers may be taken aback when a charge they may never have heard of pops up on their receipt for sun block or laundry detergent. But even if the eco-fee isn't included on the cash register receipt, it may already be included in the sticker price, without consumers' knowledge.

Stewardship Ontario said the eco-fees are not new. In fact, some stewards have been charging fees on products since the program began two years ago. Now, 13 new categories to which the fees may be applied have been added as part of the Orange Drop program.

Even if the public had years of warning, however, it is doubtful the eco-fees would have been met with open arms. Consumers generally don't enjoy digging deeper into their pockets for anything and when you throw job losses and economic uncertainty in the mix, annoyance can easily turn into outrage.

Whether or not you support eco-fees, the program itself has the environment at heart. It concentrates on the third R of the "reduce, reuse, recycle" mantra with our household hazardous waste, diverting it from landfills. Because of the program, the public can return materials to a municipal recycling facility, collection events, to many retailers and even pharmacies that are participating in the Orange Drop program.

People can complain about the extra costs of moving forward with this initiative or, instead, focus on whether we can afford not to.

After all, defending the status quo, allowing products to be produced without giving a thought to their shelf life, how they will be disposed of or their impact on the environment, will likely mean that future generations will pay an even greater price.

For more information about eco-fees, visit Stewardship Ontario's website at www.stewardshipontario.ca. To learn about the Orange Drop program and local drop-off locations, visit makethedrop.ca.