

Reduce and Reuse Before Recycling

By David Goldstein, Ventura County Public Works Agency, IWMD

When people repeat the mantra “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle,” why is recycling listed last?

The green version of the “three R’s” formula is actually a hierarchy of environmental priority, so widely accepted by experts that it has been codified into legislation. Assembly Bill 939, passed in 1989, was California’s first State legislation specifically placing “reduce” and “reuse” above recycle. Subsequent legislation has established new goals and mandates for recovering resources by diverting discards away from landfills, but all efforts have remained consistent with this order of priority cities and counties should use when designing programs to meet waste reduction goals.

“Reduce” means to use less material. For example, as some beverage companies now advertise on their product, many bottles are now made with less plastic. By making more narrow openings at the top, bottlers have reduced the size of the lid. With 60 million water bottles discarded in the United States every day (according to a 2004 study by the Container Recycling Institute), little changes like lid size reduction add up to a lot of waste prevention.

“Reuse” is more obvious. If you re-fill an empty bottle, you not only avoid the waste of trucking a petroleum-based resource (plastic) to a landfill, but you also avoid the waste of trucking it to various locations in a recycling process. Recycled plastic first goes to a recycling center for separation and baling, then to a processor where it is turned into pellets, and then to a manufacturer to be made into a new bottle.

Of course, sometimes advocates of the hierarchy can become too zealous and end up making their praise of reuse look like criticism of recycling. Consequently, on-line reuse forums were buzzing earlier this year with some leaders of the reuse movement issuing stern admonitions for others to tone down their rhetoric, lest recycling lose some of its luster. One such leader, Dan Knapp, president of Urban Ore, a reuse and recycling materials recovery enterprise in Berkeley, recently warned people to stop “trashing recycling as ‘enabling wasting,’ being ‘so last-century,’ and ‘so end of pipe.’” These are “dreary and untrue statements” and “little more than sound bites,” he said, noting the many benefits of recycling, including local economic development. According to livescience.com, using data from the Natural Resources Defense Council, California’s latest recycling goals (including diverting 75% of waste from landfills) are likely to create 110,000 new jobs by 2030.

Nevertheless, it is important to make a distinction between recycling and the higher priority “source reduction” options (reuse and recycling). Julie L. Rhodes, Recycling Economic Development Liaison for the City of Austin’s Resource Recovery and Economic Development Department, responded on line, “Our society has become very comfortable with the term ‘recycling’ as a catch-all for all things environmental. As always, to promote REUSE, we need to create an identity to get folks on board and understand why we want to reuse BEFORE recycling when possible.”

Here in Ventura County, we are fortunate to have a well-developed reuse infrastructure. In particular, downtown Ventura is a well-known thrift-store mecca. Economic development professionals have sometime grumbled about the difference between Santa Barbara’s high-end State Street retailers and Ventura’s bargain thrift stores on Main Street, but from a resource conservation perspective, it may be a good thing that Ventura does not have the same identity as its neighbor to the north.

Also, Ventura County has two Habitat for Humanity ReStores, which sell donated surplus and gently used home improvement items. These stores sell furniture, hardware, tools, lumber, doors, windows, flooring, lighting, and other items. The stores, in Oxnard and Simi Valley, are operated by the non-profit Habitat for Humanity of Ventura County, and profits fund the worthy cause of building and repairing simple, decent homes in partnership with people in need.

In the business sector, many companies have found ways to profit from reuse. For example, one tree nursery near Fillmore accepts discards from flooring retailers, using carpet trimmings to wrap planter boxes and tree trunks, protecting products during shipping without having to buy plastic packaging.

You can keep your eye on the environment by noticing the difference between reuse and recycling, and by reducing and reusing when possible.

On the net:

<http://www.container-recycling.org/index.php/issues/bottled-water/275-down-the-drain>

<http://www.livescience.com/44298-recycling-gives-california-jobs-boost.html>