

Want Increased Recycling? Bottling Companies Pass the Buck to Government

By Leon Kaye | August 16th, 2011

Well maybe not a buck, but a nickel or dime, depending on the value of local cash redemption values. **As You Sow**, a corporate accountability and corporate social responsibility advocacy group, recently released its third beverage container recycling scorecard report.

The report's results are about as shocking as the sight of empty plastic beverage bottles on the side of a road or overflowing from a trash bin. For advocates of increased recycling who agree that only so many PET bottles can be converted to tree planters, toothbrushes, or hamster cages, the results are not very encouraging. There is some good news, however in this report: **As You Sow's** work reveals that Coca-Cola and Nestlé Waters North America have started to push for extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws for post consumer packaging, a standard in Canada and Western Europe.

As You Sow's research also shares other sentiments from the beverage industry:

- As far as the PET bottle manufacturing industry goes, no notable increases in recycled content have occurred the past three years.
- PepsiCo is still the leader in recycled PET use with a 10 percent rate across all product lines.
- Food retailers and other companies with a business core not focused on beverages, like Whole Foods, have aggressive set goals to increase recycled content.
- Nestlé Waters, PepsiCo, and Coca-Cola are the Girl and Boy Scouts of the beverage companies when it comes to container recycling, but no one scored higher than a B-. Many companies received F's—or, speaking from experience, the grade really should have been an "Incomplete" because they did not bother to answer the survey, or it was lost in the mail room, or got clogged in the email spam filter.

According to **As You Sow's** findings, respondents are most likely to favor the development of national recycling or waste diversion programs with regulatory mandates that "internalize environmental externalities;" including fees that producers pay (and then pass on through increased prices.) This all sounds positive, but considering the current economic and political climate, it's a little like supporting a mission to Mars but not paying for any research and development.

Here are the problems, which are of course why some beverage companies are suggesting them:

- Regulations, the "R" word, is about as popular right now as fiscal stimulus, shovel ready projects, and health care.
- A national program will never happen, though it should be far easier than education reform or (deep breath) health care reform. It only takes one loudmouth politician to scream "states rights" and the discussion ends—a sad but true commentary on our political system.

Any talk of the above will bring back the world's most annoying woman who filled her shopping cart with generic brand sugar drinks while railing against sugary drink taxes, reminding us that government needs to stop taxing us and get out of our lives.

Municipalities are running out of landfill space and resources will only become more expensive and scarce. While bev-

erage companies overall are doing much from fronting the costs of community projects to finding innovative ways to conserve water. On container recycling, however, they need to take more leadership, so let them lobby more aggressively in the halls of state capitols or even Congress—and churn out public service announcements showing their sincerity about reducing waste (and help keep some cable companies in business).

As for the companies that received F's (again, it should have been an "incomplete"), **As You Sow** should not take it too personally. Surveys and requests for information are a dime a dozen; and for companies getting an F from yet another non-profit or advocacy group is like being gummed by a goldfish.

Want to see the future of recycling? Go to Naples, Italy, a template for citizens taking action to clean their cities and make money while government dithers.