United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

Solid Waste and
Emergency Response
(OS-305)

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Office of Solid Waste

EPA

Environmental Fact Sheet

MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE PREVENTION IN FEDERAL AGENCIES

On October 31, 1991, President Bush signed Executive Order 12780 on Recycling, charging all Federal Agencies with promoting and integrating cost-effective source reduction and recycling into waste management programs. This fact sheet highlights the ample municipal solid waste (MSW) reduction opportunities existing in Federal agencies. Source reduction is the design, manufacture, purchase, or use of materials or products (including packages) to reduce their amount or toxicity ***before*** *they enter the waste stream.*

Background

Many Federal agencies are setting up a variety of environmental management programs which include energy efficient practices, modifications to procurement specifications, and chiefly, recycling programs. Source reduction is another vital component requiring attention. As MSW generators, and as major consumers and purchasers of goods and services, Federal agencies can significantly reduce the amount of waste they generate by incorporating source reduction measures into their comprehensive waste management programs.

Source reduction is the preferred option for handling waste, ahead of recycling, because it focuses on *preventing* waste at the source, before it is generated. For this reason, Executive Order 12780 highlights the need to establish cost-effective waste reduction programs in all Federal agency operations and facilities.

Benefits of Preventing Waste

Reducing solid waste can lead to a host of benefits. First of all, the more waste is reduced the less waste there is to manage. Source reduction practices can lead directly to lower disposal costs, savings in materials and supply costs, and increased efficiency in operation.

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Because source reduction uses less material, it can help protect the environment by slowing the depletion of natural resources, reducing pollution associated with the manufacture of products, and conserving valuable landfill space. Some source reduction measures remove hazardous components from the waste stream, which is also environmentally desirable. These benefits make source reduction a winner for the economy and the environment.

Principles of Waste Prevention

Federal agencies can reduce waste in a variety of ways. Many practices fall into one of these three categories:

Reducing the amount or toxicity of materials. Examples include choosing batteries with reduced mercury, using less packaging, and conserving paper by promoting copy circulation instead of photocopying and using electronic transfer of information.

Reusing products to increase their useful life. When a product is reused, it is kept out of the trash for a longer period of time. Reuse activities include using durable coffee mugs and dishes, making notepads from used paper, reformatting used diskettes, and donating or exchanging used office supplies with other offices within an agency. Reusing products often proves to be more cost effective.

Repairing or using durable products. A product's useful life is extended if it is durable and easily repairable. A longer product life means less waste and less cost. Repair strategies include considering a product's repairability or durability and checking for extended warranties before it is purchased, recharging laser cartridges rather than purchasing new ones, and preventing jams and toner problems by cleaning and servicing copiers regularly.

How Federal Agencies Are Preventing Waste

Even before the Executive Order was signed, EPA and other Federal agencies had launched a number of significant institutional and individual changes to prevent waste. These efforts range from the establishment of simple policies that all employees can follow, to incorporating source reduction principles in agency purchasing decisions. Highlights of these efforts follow.

EPA Chooses to Reduce!
In August 1989, EPA introduced a two-sided copying policy to reduce photocopying costs. At that time, the Agency was producing over 300 million photographic copies each year, translating to over two million dollars for paper costs alone. EPA has since saved approximately 10 percent of the Agency's total copying costs, conserved filing space and reduced postage.

Here are some other examples of EPA source reduction efforts:

- Many offices are using an electronic voice mail system that reduces the amount of paper used for communication and improves efficiency.

- An information center recently converted from using paper order forms to a system that transmits document orders electronically to the remote warehouse where orders are filled.

- Local merchants provide a five cent discount when EPA headquarters employees bring their own mug for coffee, rather than using a disposable cup.

- The in-house printshop is now using non-petroleum, vegetable-based inks in an effort to use less toxic chemicals.

- An office supply exchange program enables employees to reuse office supplies such as binders, manila folders, pens, internal mailing envelopes, and in-boxes.

- A laboratory in Corvallis, Oregon, has donated 50 boxes of books, journals, and publications to Czechoslovakia, and 68 boxes to Budapest. This lab also reuses some organic solvents in laboratories.

- The Regional Office in Chicago found several ways to reuse letterhead stationery and envelopes when their address changed. The office uses the old letterhead for "in-house" memoranda, and has printed labels with the new address to place over the old address on the envelopes.

DoD Cuts Paper Waste!
The Department of Defense is moving away from a paper-intensive mode to a highly automated way of doing business. Through a Computer-Aided Acquisition and Logistics Support system, DoD is eliminating hard copies of many of the technical documents in weapon system design and support (e.g., technical drawings and detailed maintenance manuals). This joint DoD-industry initiative significantly reduces paper usage for both DoD and its contractors, and improves work productivity and quality, while reducing costs associated with making duplicate hard-copies.

USDA's Food Distribution Program Conserves Materials!
As the largest purchaser of food products in the world, the Department of Agriculture encourages manufacturers and shippers of food products to consider the efficient use of raw materials in manufacturing packages or products. USDA employs a purchasing preference for products with packaging that create less waste (i.e., using less corrugated cardboard in shipping cases and less plastic in packages).