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WM exec delves into contamination concerns

By Dan Leif, Resource Recycling

Nov. 18, 2014

Don't fear the evolving waste stream. But be judicious about what new packaging you allow in your recycling program. That was the message from a Waste Management leader speaking on an EPA webinar last week.

Susan Robinson, federal public affairs director for publicly traded WM, offered a number of insights about how the country's largest waste and recycling firm is trying to adapt to the "evolving ton" coming into materials recovery facilities as paper use declines and the plastics packaging space moves forward at light speed.

However, the takeaway from her [30-minute talk](#), which was part of the EPA's Sustainable Materials Management webinar series, was that the recycling industry should focus more on clean material and less on constantly increasing tonnages.

"Let's not divert material for diversion's sake alone," she said. "An overall environmental benefit should be the end goal."

While many industry players have in recent years begun to worry about the rise of flexible film packaging (think pouches, among other types), Robinson was accepting of the trend, even though these materials are not easily recyclable because they are constructed using layers of different types of resin and other materials.

Robinson, for instance, cited figures from a flexible plastic packaging group that showed packaging soup in a flexible film package instead of a steel can would decrease packaging weight from 312.4 grams to 28.4 grams. The figures indicate carbon emissions associated with the film packaging were roughly one-tenth of those of the steel can option – much of those carbon savings are a result of the fact that pouches simply use less material to begin with.

Recycling advocates, Robinson noted, should not be standing in the way of such developments.

"Not everything is recycled in a true circular economy," she said. "Have we put on blinders where recycling is the only thing we care about? Are we so focused on hitting end-of-life recycling numbers that we forget about the

first R – reduce?"

Those questions raise another: If more hard-to-recycle packaging is replacing staple MRF materials like metal and paper, how will the industry continue to move forward?

Robinson suggested a broader push to make sure the high-value items that do enter the stream avoid contamination along the way.

She said Waste Management's 49 single-stream MRFs in the U.S. currently see an average of 16 percent contamination on in-bound loads, an increase of 3 percentage points over the company's "historic" rates.

She added every ton of contaminants costs the company \$140 in disposal fees and lost revenue. Due to contamination increases, WM's recycling processing expenditures grew 20 percent over the last two years, Robinson said.

Her first suggestion to improve the situation: Keep plastic bags out of recycling carts, and promote systems in which bags are returned to retail locations instead.

"We clean screens six to eight times a day to cut plastic bags out of sorting equipment," she said. "From our perspective not much good comes from film plastic coming to our MRFs. But there are robust markets for that material if it's clean and dry."

Robinson also said she was encouraged by broader initiatives WM and industry partners are undertaking to better communicate to residents which items should be placed curbside.

She said WM is working to push ahead its "**Recycle Often. Recycle Right**" campaign that aims to deliver three basic messages to consumers: Recycle all empty bottles, cans and paper; keep foods and liquids out; and recycle plastic bags at retail locations.

The awareness effort includes unbranded flyers and brochures the company is sharing with "anyone who wants them."

"Those who have survived the last couple of years in recycling are now a lot better at what we do," Robinson said. "We know the stream better and have gotten better at communicating with public. ... I'm actually more optimistic than I've been. We're communicating with one voice, which is really key for recycling in the future."