

On Tuesday, October 13, NERC's Virtual Fall Conference kicked off with Lynn Rubinstein making opening remarks. She thanked all sponsors, benefactors (including Can Crusher US, Coca-Cola, Consumer Technology Association, Panasonic, Samsung and Waste Management), sustaining members, and encouraged attendees to visit the virtual exhibit hall during the breaks and at the end of every day. Lynn also presented NERC's Environmental Leadership Awards. Three outstanding programs received awards, as well as two special recognitions. Each of the winners was selected for its particularly high level of environmental achievement that supports NERCs mission:

- *Advisory Member award* – Waste Management for recycling food waste at its CORE® facilities and generating green energy
- *Public Sector award* – Maryland Green Purchasing Committee for its Conserving Resources and Promoting Recycled Content through its state procurement program
- *Private Sector award* – Green Kelly Boards for developing a process for recycling aseptic cartons into a usable product

more than 50 years of being a self-supporting non-profit dedicated to the promotion of recycling

- *Special Recognition* – The staff of the Northeast Recycling Council for its ongoing dedication to the organization and their achievements in support of NERC
- *NERC Benefactors* – Bottle Crusher US, Consumer Technology Association, Panasonic, Samsung, and Waste Management
- *Advisory Member award*– Waste Management's CORE® facilities have the capability to process a wide range of organic material, varying from clean source separated organics, to packaged food. Once the organic slurry product is produced, it is transported to a wastewater treatment plant where it is introduced into their anaerobic digestors to increase the production of renewable biogas. There are three facilities in the NERC region: Elizabeth, New Jersey; New York City; and Boston, Massachusetts. As an example, since its launch date in 2018, the New Jersey facility has diverted over 52,000 tons of food waste.
- *Public Sector award*– The Maryland Green Purchasing Committee is a leader in sustainable procurement in the public sector. Established in 2010 by the Green Maryland Act, the program is administered by the Maryland Department of General Services. Unique to Maryland, this inter-agency Committee develops tools, best practices, training programs, and approves environmentally preferable specifications for State agencies to adopt. As a result of this initiative and subsequent state agency actions, in fiscal year 2021 there were 1,860,992 lbs. of recycled content purchases. These purchases resulted in a cost savings of \$821,179 and a greenhouse gas emissions reduction of 158,159 Metric Tons of CO₂e

Private Sector award– Green Kelly Boards was recognized for its innovative process for taking aseptic cartons (grade #52), such as milk and juice cartons, from MRFs, and manufacturing a cover board used in commercial roofing. This board, made 100% of recycled material, can be used as a sound, fire, air or vapor barrier. In the last quarter of 2020, Kelly Green Board processed 606,000 pounds of cartons from MRFs in the Northeast.

Keynote Presentation

The conference's Keynote Speaker was Carlton Waterhouse, Deputy Assistant Administrator, Office of Land & Emergency Management, US EPA who was introduced by Josh Kelly, Materials Management Section Chief, Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, Vermont Agency of Natural Resources and NERC's President. Covering the topic of *Federal Recycling Policies & Environmental Justice Initiatives*, he talked about environmental justice policies at the level of the influence offices. What does environmental justice mean? He shared his concepts and thoughts and what the policies are. He stressed that environmental justice should be thought about as a broad rather than narrow framework. The goal is not the same as the course to get there. There are efforts we must take. We need to frame environmental justice not just in terms of access to a clean environment but also to help people think about the three different parts that we take to get there. 1) The most well-known is distribution. Think about it in the context of the distribution of environmental burdens and harms, exposure to pollution and risk. Some communities bear the disproportionate burden of the pollutions which can be harmful and, at worst, sickness and disease. He said when we think about environmental justice, we should think about distributional framework and the services that lead to pollution. Who gets the services or good associated with the opportunities that are related to the production of pollution or

avoiding pollution through recycling? How are opportunities created – employment, benefits and services? Which communities are included, and which are left behind? 2) The second part of the distribution is Processes—how are decisions being made, who is in the room, who is being consulted? Governmental involvement and community consultation is not the same. Some communities do a great job of keeping their areas engaged and some do not. Waterhouse pointed out that it is important for the decision makers at the private and governmental level to make sure the community engagement is present. Environmental justice is furthered when the community is informed and involved, they are participating and they play a role (where facilities will be located, what routes trucks will use, operating hours, affect members of the communities, etc.). They will be the ones who live with the outcome that will be made. The government has a public participation process. From a process standpoint, reach out to community members where they are. Partner with the local organization and groups that are active in the communities. Think through how we meaningfully involve as many people from the community as possible. See it as an investment in the future success of operations and building relationships that speak to the concerns members of the communities are going to have. What kind of opportunities are you going to provide? He stressed that it is important to get involved in a positive framework as much as possible. 3) Finally, the last component is recognizing that all facilities that relate to this work are present somewhere. Facility operators should recognize themselves as part of the community. This is important in order to build sustaining long-term relationships with community members. It is critical to success goes a long way.

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Waterhouse then switched gears and talked about the national recycling strategy that EPA will released later in the fall that will focus on municipal solid waste recycling and on a broader vision

of recycling material in our communities. Recycling alone is not enough. We need a transformed vision. He pointed out that cement, aluminum, steel, plastics and food waste are huge contributors to climate change. We must be more innovative the way we use resources in the U.S. However, we should not exclude equity in the work that we do; we should be inclusive of communities and use innovations to help people of all cultures that benefit from the environmental impact. He explained that an improved recycling system alone won't achieve the results needed – that is they are developing reducing the impacts of materials more broadly by designing products to be more sustainable, maximizing reuse and recycling, reduce, reuse and recover material, such as concrete, textiles, electronics, etc. We need a series of strategies on how we build a circular economy for all and identify key action needed to transform our recycling system. In November 2020, the EPA announced the national recycling goal. In 2022, they will draft a measurement recycling guide, moving towards a standardized methodology to reach our goals. In 2020, the Save our Seas Act 2.0 also passed, which resulted in several reports with regards to impact of plastics. The low market value of plastics resins contributes to 8 percent of plastics being recycled. We need to provide incentives to manufacturers for circular packaging and increasing recycling content in plastic goods. As we look at how future bills and grants are going to have an impact, it is important that we get with you on how these grants will make significant improvements in how we manage waste. We need to keep equity squarely in the center of the conversation in order to maintain a sustainable approach in the way we think about communities; we want to keep justice in all frameworks.

Recycling Policies

After the keynote, the conference turned its focus to recycling policies and infrastructure. Cathy Jamieson, Solid Waste Program Manager, Department of Environmental Conservation, Waste Management and Prevention Division moderated the discussion, which started with Jeff Weld, Casella's Director of Sustainability

who covered *Achieve EPR Goals By Leveraging Existing Recycling Infrastructure and Knowledge*. He talked about meeting society's pressing climate and environmental justice goals and seeing an urgent need to further advance waste reduction, reuse and recycling. So how can we best create an infrastructure and leverage these things to take it to the next step. How can we move forward? We need to look at recycling today – what has worked well? The convenient, safe and efficient recovery of millions of tons per year of quality recyclable material, investing in existing infrastructure and market-drive adoption of new technology, thousands of green jobs create, and high-value commodities enable the recovery of lower value commodities. What do we need to improve? Contamination in bins, weak and unreliable markets, failure to design for recyclability, market uncertainty deters further investment in infrastructure, and the rising costs of recycling. As far as recycling with EPR, many times they see the need to work through timing, logistics, governance, fairness, and there must be recycling service providers and producers to make sure the funding model works, lowering cost of collection to make it a viable option. EPR will succeed to the extent that it can strengthen connections, collaboration and communication throughout this chain. He said in order to be considered successful, EPR strengthen markets for recycled commodities, reduce confusion and contamination in the recycling, drive producers to design for recycling, reuse and waste reduction, enable strong, sustained investment in education and infrastructure, achieve measurable economic and environmental benefits.

Next, Sydney Harris, Senior Associate for Policy and Programs for the Product Stewardship Institute and Taylor Cass Talbott, Project Officer for Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) spoke about *Creating Inclusive EPR Systems*. Harris said that the Product Stewardship Institute believes that EPR is the centerpiece of the circular economy and pointed out that there are 124 laws in the U.S., 15 different

products in 33 states, including Washington DC. The first two PPP laws passed in 2021 in OR, ME. She expects to see a dozen state bills in 2022 and beyond. Federal Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act (EPR for packaging, SUP bans + fees, national bottle bill, pause on plastic production). Typical stakeholders are state oversight agencies, stewardship organization, multi-stakeholder advisory council, producers, institutional stakeholders, community stakeholders. Emerging Policy Elements are starting to appear more prominently, include recycling accessibility such as translation of education materials, physical accessibility of collection infrastructure; Responsible End-of-Life Management such as certification of end markets and PRO guarantee, cumulative impacts of pollution and no harm to people or environment; and Economic Opportunities in Recycling such as worker health and safety, living wages and supportive benefits, inclusion of independent contractors and possible job opportunities in litter and cleanup.

Talbott talked about the history of waste management in the U.S. and the OECD promotion of EPR in the 1980s and 1990s, stressing that the main drivers of policies were economic and environmental. She also said there was importance of the informal waste sector in today's middle-income countries. Global Alliance of Waste Pickers has done global work on inclusion in EPR. The concern is that EPR may sideline a lot of waste pickers who rely on waste as a source of income, so we need to make sure we look at inclusion, fighting for approach to EPR – who gets contracts to provide waste services? Informal waste recovery workers in the Global North, include scrap collectors, canners, secondhand goods and repair street vendors, digital marketplace secondhand goods vending. There need to be accessible opportunities for advancements in the system. Informal versus formal waste work. There needs to be more support for gradual entry points in the informal sphere. Some recommendations shared for inclusive EPR were the thorough mapping of waste systems prior to EPR planning so that informal stakeholders can

be identified and integrated into planning and implementation, multi-stakeholder process that enable authentic co-production of the systems, support for training and organizing, define and set targets for inclusion, ensure full waste collection (including in informal settlements), financial and material transparency, etc.

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Finally, for this session, Miriam Gordon, Policy Director for UPSTREAM Solutions (formerly the Product Policy Institute) spoke on *Reduce & Reuse Solving the Plastic Pollution Waste and Climate Crisis by Moving Upstream*. She explained that there has been a policy shift from waste management to waste prevention. While there have been decades of focus on diversion from landfill, ever increasing quantities of MSW being generated, we need to focus on a prevention approach and find ways to build that into our policies. The changes that are needed in Plastic Pollution Policies are ban single-use plastics (created regrettable single-use substitutes), recycling or compostable (china ban unveiled the myth that we can recycle our way out) (food ware not readily recyclable or compostable) and throw away-free (reduce/reuse) (eliminate idea of single-use altogether) (change the throw-away culture- deliver products without all the waste). Two main policy approaches in UPSTREAM's playbook are making reduce and reuse the norm. Some of the strategies are: Strategy #1 – Reduce as much as possible, ban single-use products where it leads to a reuse option including plastic bags (to reusable bags), hotel toiletries (bulk dispensers) and beverage bottles (refill stations); Enact accessories on request law (only include utensils as needed); Strategy #2 – Transition the rest to reusable/refillable, sector wide targets for reusable packaging, only reusable food ware for onsite dining, consumer charges for throw away cups and containers, reuse at government events. Strategy #3 – EPR for packaging (hold producers accountable); Strategy #4 – Use a justice and equity lens, #5 – Need government agencies to support this transition and incentives for

reuse businesses.

Compostable Packaging

The final session of the day was a panel discussion that covered front of house food scraps and compostable packaging.

Moderator, David Fridland, Sustainability Manager for Eco-Products, introduced Wendell Simonson, Marketing Director for Biodegradable Products Institute, Toby Alves, Zero Waste Specialist for Eco-Products, Debra Darby, Manager of Organics Sustainability Solutions for Tetra Tech and Conor Miller, Founder and CEO of Black Earth Compost. Darby spoke first about the source separating of food waste from landfill. She stressed it is a valuable resource after going through composting and anaerobic digestion processes and can produce quality consistent compost. When we talk about compostable food service ware items, we collect as much as we can and get it diverted from the trash. Certified compostable items have a little way to catch on here in North America. In some areas, compostables are widely accepted, but there is a growth area that we still need to get through to make sure they are part of the food waste stream. Large brand owners are moving to certified compostable packaging such as pods, etc.

Simonson pointed out that the biggest thing to be cautious of is the material actually compostable. Some consumer items take advantage of the labeling, but they are not; they are passed through decision makers who elect to use the term bio-degradable as a marketing term rather than in the actual sense. ASTM standards say that BPI certified is based on real-world composting environments. We are having a good conversation on whether lab standards are continuing to be a good proxy for the field.

Alves said that with regards to post-consumer food waste and run of house food waste, we all know that food organics and recycling don't go well together. Many operations where food is on the

product, we must think about how to manage that. Many times, it is damaging the relationships from the operator. He stressed that we need to have everything compostable. We can do this in a cafeteria, food court, etc. We also need to certify compostable food ware and eliminate as much as possible.

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Miller explained that Black Earth Compost started by being able to line bins with compostable bags and now they collect all food waste. The company started doing events with compostable packaging only and no contamination, brand value for a lot of restaurants and high-end places. This shows customers that you care about environment, employees, etc. It also makes it cleaner, with higher carbon additive for food waste which helps balance out the amount of material you are managing. The higher the carbon, the less they are dependent on the stockpile. It does take a little more work because you must turn the pile few more times to make sure everything breaks down. He pointed out that one of the challenges is schools—buying compostable trays is not ready to go at this point. With the case of paper lunch bags, other types of wrappers might be thrown in there. On the other hand, if you are going to go front of house you must go all the way. Everything must be compostable. Another challenge is fake “compostable knockoffs on Amazon and having to make sure it is certified.

Today, October 13, the conference continues with a further discussion on environmental justice, ocean transportation issues and reusing and recycling solar panels. We look forward to these great discussions!

For more information, visit <https://nerc.org/conferences-and-workshops/agenda>.

**** NERC's Full Environmental Leadership Awards information and listing from NERC Press Release.***

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