Transforming Materials Management for the 21st Century

January 2012
Hartford, CT

CT DEEP hosted a regional roundtable conversation with Northeast environmental and economic development commissioners in January 2012. The goal was to envision how 21st century waste management can unlock the value of the materials economy. State commissioners and thought leaders in industry, industrial ecology, and economics focused on next steps that we must take to transform waste and materials management in the Northeast region. Here are some thoughts catalyzed by this conversation.

1. Recover the value of materials through reuse and recycling

1a. Unlock untapped values from waste stream

- Distribute value downstream
- Support specialized collection to maximize value for high quality materials (e.g., plastics, white paper)
- Promote purchase of recycled content products to close the loop and support recycled content businesses

1b. Harness global economic forces

- Concentrate value by aggregating commodities for economy of scale
- Realize savings in recovering materials versus newly produced materials
- Optimize recovery of materials (e.g., food scrap recycling facilities add value through producing compost and clean energy while offering reduced disposal costs)

1c. Send clearer economic signals

- Continue product stewardship efforts to transfer recycling and disposal costs from taxpayers to manufacturers
- Allow market to drive behaviors of waste generators: Encourage haulers and municipalities to use unit-based pricing to Save Money And Reduce Trash
- Identify economic development opportunities when siting facilities

2. Sustainably manage what can't be recycled

2a. Build environmental stewardship

- Minimize amount of recyclables delivered to resource recovery facilities
- Maintain consistency with materials management hierarchy prioritizing waste reduction, reuse, recycling, and energy recovery over landfilling

2b. Achieve economic sustainability

- Minimize need for additional energy recovery or disposal capacity now and in the future
- Consider options to control price volatility
- Prevent incurring Superfund liability associated with landfill disposal

2c. Control energy costs

- Ensure price of electricity generation at resource recovery facilities is sustainable
- Regulate rates to achieve healthy mix of competition from private and public sources to stabilize pricing

3. Establish financial sustainability in materials management

3a. Achieve financial stability

- Evaluate role of assessments or fees to incentivize recycling
- Adopt resource management contracting best practices
- Optimize value associated with avoided disposal costs (municipalities would save $35m statewide by achieving a 40% recycling rate)

3b. Modernize infrastructure

- Connect municipalities to aggregate scale in collection
- Collaborate to close infrastructure gaps

3c. Collaborate with others

- Identify economic assistance for reuse and recycling based businesses with economic development agencies
- Integrate clean energy funding resources with reuse and recycling businesses