

Rachel's Environment & Health News

#651 - Clean Production -- Part 2

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Clean production is an exciting new idea that offers environmental and economic-development activists something to be FOR instead of merely AGAINST. As we saw last week, clean production is not just about making the same old products by slightly cleaner methods; instead, it is an entirely new way of looking at materials and energy starting early in the life of a product or service, carefully thinking through each step from extraction of raw materials through manufacture, packaging, transportation, marketing, use, and final disposal. Unlike "pollution prevention" and "recycling," clean production asks fundamental questions about consumption: is a particular product even needed in the first place? And is it being produced in a way that promotes the goals of the community?

Now a loose-knit organization called the Clean Production Network has evolved from a two-year collaboration between environmental justice activists,[1] mainstream environmental groups, labor unions, and academics -- specifically, the Lowell Center for Sustainable Production at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell,[2] and the Center for Clean Technologies and Clean Products at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville.[3] The Clean Production Network was created to help U.S. labor and environmental groups light a fire under governments and corporations, to promote the needed shift to the new way of thinking.

Joel Tickner at the Lowell Center says, "The purpose of the [Clean Production Network] project is to have a proactive, solutions oriented vision for the future -- the environmental movement is always on the defensive and pollution prevention isn't doing enough so we have to move beyond it. Industry and government are out there defining clean production but the grassroots movement isn't. As you know, we've always been fighting [against] things rather than saying yes to things." Clean production offers grass-roots activists something to say Yes to.

Beverly Thorpe of Clean Production Action (with offices in Canada and England[4]) has now written the definitive CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO CLEAN PRODUCTION,[5] which we began reviewing last week. The Guide is accompanied by a lengthy "contact list" of groups around the world working on clean production.[6] The "contact list" also includes a short but useful bibliography.

To recap, clean production has four main elements:

- 1) Precaution: When an activity raises threats of harm to the environment or human health, precautionary measures should be taken even if some cause and effect relationships are not fully established scientifically. [See REHW #586.]
- 2) Prevention: It is cheaper and more effective to prevent environmental damage than to attempt to manage or "cure" it. Prevention requires examining the entire product life cycle from raw material extraction to ultimate disposal and choosing the least-damaging alternative (including, in some instances, the alternative of doing nothing).
- 3) Real democracy. Clean Production involves all those affected by industrial activities, including workers, consumers and communities. "Access to information and involvement in decision-making, coupled with power and resources, will help to ensure democratic control," says Beverly Thorpe.
- 4) An integrated and holistic approach: Society must adopt an integrated approach to environmental resource use and consumption. We need to think in a systems way. For each product we buy, we need to have information accessible about the materials, energy and people involved in making it. A holistic approach would avoid moving hazards around (from water to air, for example) or from the environment to workers or consumers. It would also avoid creating new problems while solving an older one (e.g., genetic engineered plants as a replacement for pesticides).

Beverly Thorpe's GUIDE offers 5 strategies that activists can use

to promote clean production. Last week we discussed the first two: (1) Different ways of measuring excessive use of resources, then working to reduce the wasting of materials and energy. And (2) providing consumers with information about the full life-cycle of products and services so that they can make truly informed choices. Specifically, Thorpe urges the careful use of "life cycle assessments" -- a specific technique for studying the consequences of producing products or services.

The third basic strategy is broadly called "producer responsibility." One kind of "producer responsibility" requires corporations to publish reports on the environmental and social consequences of their business activities, and to constantly strive to improve their performance. Some corporations have begun voluntarily. For example, Hewlett Packard (HP), the electronics giant, adopted a product stewardship program in 1992. HP examines the environmental performance of its suppliers world-wide and expects them to develop (a) a policy of continuous environmental improvement and (b) a plan for implementing the policy. For example, HP's suppliers are expected to find the least-damaging and most-reusable plastic resins.

Some retailers have begun to take responsibility for the products they sell. For example, the Swedish retailer of home furnishings, IKEA, refuses to sell products made by unsustainable forestry practices or made from PVC plastic. B&Q, a major do-it-yourself housewares and sporting goods chain in Britain, ensures that all of its products are certifiable as having been produced by sustainable forestry practices. By the end of 1999, B&Q suppliers will be expected to know the key impacts of each of their products, throughout the product's life, and have a specific program to reduce those impacts. For example, all of B&Q's carpet suppliers are required to get involved in efforts to produce recyclable carpeting, and suppliers of bathroom products are required to seek alternatives to PVC plastic.

Products have social impacts as well as environmental, and the Clean Production Network considers both kinds equally important. For example, the CITIZEN'S GUIDE TO CLEAN PRODUCTION describes the international Clean Clothes Campaign,[7] which is an alliance of retailers, consumer groups, and national solidarity groups in India, the Philippines, and Bangladesh, plus labor unions, women's organizations, and churches. The Clean Clothes Campaign holds retailers and clothing companies accountable for poor working conditions in the garment trade, as well as the intensive use of pesticides to grow cotton. The Campaign has negotiated a code of conduct for retailers and buyers called the Fair Trade Charter for Garments.[7]

Thorpe highlights other examples: the Clean Computer Campaign developed by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition in San Jose, California, for example, which is producing a "report card" on each computer manufacturer and is advocating that manufacturers "take back" their computers for reuse and recycling when they become obsolete.

Thorpe's GUIDE offers a useful list of questions that can be asked of any manufacturer, retailer, restaurant, or even school cafeteria manager regarding their efforts to locate and purchase minimally damaging goods.

Thorpe's point is that "free trade" is making government regulations less and less effective as time passes, but corporations can still be pressured by organized citizens. As Thorpe points out, the success of the anti-genetically-engineered food campaign in Europe has shown the power of consumers. (See REHW #649.)

Another approach is to establish alternative consumption patterns directly, not waiting for corporations to reform their behavior. For example, community supported agriculture (CSA) offers a way for communities to support family farms, provide themselves with wholesome, reasonably-priced food and at the same time withhold

their support from agricultural corporations and the chemicalized farms they hold in thrall.[8]

A new idea, now spreading throughout Europe and parts of Asia, is called "extended producer responsibility" (EPR). It basically means that the manufacturer retains responsibility -- physical responsibility, economic responsibility, and legal liability -- for a product throughout the product's life. In the extreme case, the consumer never owns the product at all, but leases it from the manufacturer who is obligated to take it back when its useful life is over. EPR initiatives are being worked out now in Austria, Germany, Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Japan, Taiwan, Korea and the UK. Clearly, this is an idea whose time has come. However, Beverley Thorpe reports that the U.S. government is lobbying hard to kill EPR initiatives, on the grounds that such laws represent barriers to free trade. The U.S. government also argues that everyone bears responsibility for the products that manufacturers offer us and that it is therefore unfair to hold manufacturers responsible for their actions.

In her "what you can do" section, Thorpe recommends that activists get their local government to initiate a "green" procurement policy, refusing to purchase toxic materials, for example. (See REHW #602.) Or join the campaign, spearheaded by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, to support EPR initiatives.[9] Or replace your local recycling campaign with a local Extended Producer Responsibility Campaign. As Thorpe's GUIDE points out, "We should recycle, but it is not the first thing we should do; it is the last. Redesign first, then reduce, reuse and finally recycle if there is no other alternative."

Two other strategies for moving toward clean production are ecological tax reform and ending government subsidies for polluting industries.

Ecological tax reform aims to shift taxes away from value-adding activities (such as work) and onto value-depleting activities, such as water pollution and logging old-growth forests. As a soon-to-be-released report from Sustainable America says, instead of taxing wages and income, we could be taxing carbon (i.e., fossil fuel use); major pollution sources; fertilizers and pesticides; vehicle emissions; land speculation; contaminated sites; waste; water; and the depletion of forests and fisheries.[10] Environmental taxes are usually intended to be "revenue neutral" -- they don't cost any more than present taxes, but they provide new incentives for preserving neighborhoods, waterways, and other natural resources.

Ending government subsidies to polluting corporations is an obvious way to promote clean production -- a subject we will cover in a future issue, though not next week.

--Peter Montague (National Writers Union, UAW Local 1981/AFL-CIO)

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[1] For example, a recent meeting in Detroit, Michigan included representatives from Sustainable America (New York, N.Y.); West Harlem Environmental Action (New York, N.Y.); the Environmental Justice Center at Clark Atlanta University (Atlanta, Ga.); Deep South Center for Environmental Justice, Xavier University (New Orleans, La.); the New Mexico Environmental Law Center (Santa Fe, N.M.); the Ecology Center of Ann Arbor (Ann Arbor, Mi.); the Southern Organizing Committee (Atlanta, Ga.); Tennessee Citizen Action (Nashville, Tenn.); Detroiters Working for Environmental Justice (Detroit, Mi.); United Auto Workers (Ann Arbor, Mi.); Ontario Toxic Watch Research Coalition (Kitchener, Ontario); the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition (San Jose, Cal.); Sierra Club Southeast Michigan (Detroit, Mi.); Natural Resources Defense Council (New York, N.Y.);

Environmental Defense Fund (New York, N.Y.); and others.

[2] University of Massachusetts at Lowell, Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, One University Avenue, Lowell, MA 01854-2881. Contact: Joel Tickner. Telephone (978) 934-2980. <http://www.uml.edu/centers/LCSP>.

[3] Center for Clean Products and Clean Technologies, University of Tennessee Knoxville, 600 Henley Street, Suite 311, Knoxville, TN 37996-4134; telephone (423) 974-8979. The director is Gary Davis. See: <http://eerc.ra.utk.edu/divisions/clean/-default.html>.

[4] Clean Production Action, 5964 Avenue Notre Dame de Grace, Montreal, Que, Canada H4A 1N1; tel: +1 (514)484-4207; fax: +1 (514)484-2696. Or: P.O. Box 12201, London SW17 9ZL, United Kingdom; telephone and fax: (44) 181-672-4354. E-mail: bthorpe@web.net (Canada); ticknerj@woods.uml.edu (USA); iza@cpa-iza.u-net.com (UK); beckros@ebox.tninet.se (Sweden); pawel@otzo.most.org.pl (Poland). [Http://www.gemini.most.org.pl/cpa/](http://www.gemini.most.org.pl/cpa/).

[5] Copies of the CITIZEN'S GUIDE can be ordered by sending a check or money order for \$10 US plus \$3 shipping and handling (\$6 for airmail outside North America) to The Lowell Center for Sustainable Production, One University Avenue Lowell, MA USA 01854; email: lcspp@uml.edu. Make check or money order payable to The Lowell Center for Sustainable Production.

[6] The very useful Clean Production Contact List and bibliography is available on the ANPED website at <http://www.antenna.nl/anped/CleanPRL.htm>.

[7] See www.cleanclothes.org.

[8] On community supported agriculture, see <http://www.misa.umn.edu/csag.html#csapub>.

[9] Contact the International Campaign for Responsible Technology, c/o Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, 760 N. First St., San Jose, CA 95112; telephone (408) 287-6707; E-mail: svtc@igc.org. [Http://www.svtc.org](http://www.svtc.org).

[10] See www.sanetwork.org.

Descriptor terms: clean production; sustainability; clean production action; producer responsibility; extended producer responsibility; hewlett packard; ikea; b&q; clean clothes campaign; clean computer campaign; silicon valley toxics coalition; green taxes; tax reform;