

# **RECYCLING THE AMERICAN WAY**

By Stephen Bates

**Whilst Mother Nature stretched her legs and the resolve of the Southern Gulf States in late August, it was ironic that 1,500 miles north in Minneapolis, the great and the good of America's recycling community gathered at the National Recycling Congress to discuss, amongst other things, ways in which recycling could help reduce the sort of pollution that many observers have suggested as being the reason behind the unusual ferocity of Hurricane Katrina.**

**Whether recycling can have any real affect on the weather is for another forum but what is clear is that there remains a growing trend amongst much of the United States to embrace more effective waste management practices.**

**Enviro Comms' Stephen Bates and Mark Hughes visited the Congress and report here on the state of US recycling and some interesting ideas that might just work over here.**

It's common for many British people to draw comparison between the UK and the US more than any other two nations on the assumption that the two are very much alike. Whilst there are examples where this holds true (a walk round a Wal Mart supermarket for example, reveals it to be exactly, and I do mean exactly, the same as Asda), there remain far too many important differences for a true comparison to be drawn – particularly when it comes to public services.

Principal amongst these is geography. It's impossible for all but the regular visitor to appreciate the sheer scale of the place and the unique challenges this creates for municipal managers.

Take Minneapolis, the location for the congress. By American standards, it's a fairly unremarkable city, not particularly large (about 1 million residents discounting the twin city of St Paul) and was built around the grain and flour industry, powered by the Mississippi River. Leave the city limits in any direction and it will be 400 miles before you reach the next major town. That's like leaving London heading north and seeing nothing other than fields until you reach Edinburgh.

We spoke with one Recycling Officer who was responsible for 60,000 homes in Arkansas. On the face of it, this sounds pretty much typical of many regions in the UK until you realise that those 60,000 homes are spread over an area similar in size to Wales.

Consequently, local authorities (they refer to them as either Counties or Cities, Local Authority is the Police Force), are faced with either dealing with the waste themselves or suffering massive haulage costs in transporting the waste to processing plants in other States or, as is most often the case, both.

As a result, recycling has gathered great momentum as an effective means to drive down costs with many counties and cities achieving some truly outstanding results through the introduction of various schemes.

These achievements are even more remarkable when you consider the level of Federal support available to cities and counties in the US, which amounts to, as the Americans would say; diddley squat or, as we Brits prefer “bugger all!”

Whilst the recycling movement in the UK has been largely driven by Europe via Whitehall, the Bush administration provides no support or legislation for waste management whatsoever. There are no financial incentives given, no penalties, no targets to meet, no federal directives, no rules to adhere to or help to call upon.

Clearly, when you have States larger than most European countries, developing a nationwide waste strategy is hardly going to be a realistic prospect so it's not surprising that none exists...or maybe not given George Bush's unwillingness to fully embrace the Kyoto Agreement.

However, this lack of Federal support appears in no way to have subdued efforts by the cities and counties to increase recycling. In fact, there's evidence to suggest that it is precisely because of this lack of support that has created the successes being achieved by being allowed to do their own thing, try different methods and push the boundaries without fear of political retribution if it doesn't work out.

One of the most obvious examples of this approach is Single Stream Recycling. One county in Texas with around 250,000 households has achieved a 75% recycling rate using this scheme. The set-up costs were huge but it's paid for itself many times over in just a few years. Many other counties are achieving similar rates (some as much as 82%) using Single Stream.

There's a movement across America called “Working Towards Zero Waste”. I attended their seminar expecting to hear from a pressure group speaking of an “ideal” that could be worked towards but never realistically reached. The fact is that when you are achieving such high recycling rates, and seeing the sort of things this group is doing, zero waste is very much a real possibility. This is something that has only been able to come about because of the lack of high-level red tape that would otherwise hinder and delay the decision making process.

As the recycling officer for the Texan county with 75% recycling states (she's an ex-pat from Bournemouth incidentally); *“being accountable to those who you serve is a far greater motivator than being accountable to a White House politician. You don't live next door to the politician, you don't shop in the same shops, meet them at barbeques or your children play with theirs”*. Wise words indeed.

As you might expect, our principal area of interest was seeing how they handle communication and education. Given that America pretty much invented marketing, it's no surprise that they have fully embraced this with great effect and its importance is universally recognised. Generally, the decision making process goes along the lines of 1) we need to introduce a recycling scheme 2) we need to educate people about it.....In

the UK, education all too often features much further down the list and when you look at the rates being achieved in the US, one can see the folly of so doing.

America has a huge diversity of culture and social status with everything from appalling poverty (almost to third-world standards) to the “über-rich”, with these groups often living just a few blocks from one another. This throws up some interesting challenges when planning communication strategies and nowhere is this more obvious than in California.

A few years ago, the City of Los Angeles introduced a new kerbside scheme in some of the more salubrious parts of town. Participation was good apart from one particularly prosperous area where hardly anyone was using the scheme. This perplexed the waste managers. They had been highly diligent with communications, running an advertising campaign, leaflets and the like. Everyone else had responded except this one area. Were the residents so rich as to be totally arrogant towards the need to recycle?

The reason was a very simple one. Very nearly all the households in this one area employed maids or some form of housekeeping service. These employees were charged with all the mundane household chores including waste. They were also almost always Hispanics with very little or no grasp of the English language. The communication had been targeted towards the householder rather than those who actually dealt with the household waste.

In a country where over 50% of the population are non-indigenous, the need for culturally sensitive communications is ever-present and quite often, one has to ask, “who is the true minority?”

Community-centric education is very much a vital part of the communication strategy in America and refreshing to see it working with great success as its something that we’ve long championed as being vital here in the UK.

Doorstepping originated in the States and is still a valuable element in the communication mix. One notable difference though, is that they get householders to always sign a pledge card to confirm their willingness to recycle. The names of those who have pledged are then published in local newspapers under the heading of “our local recyclers”. In tests, this has proven to be a highly effective way to increase participation even further.

Their spend on communications is about the same as in the UK – between £1.50 and £2.50 per household but media and production costs are generally a lot cheaper than in Europe enabling them to do a lot more. Media choice is also greater with local cable TV channels providing a viable means for even small campaigns to gain coverage and increase the reach of their message.

So, what does the future hold for recycling in America? From what we’ve seen and heard, there’s a greater desire amongst US residents to recycle than is found in the UK (although the gap is narrowing). There’s also a far bigger, more insatiable market for recycled materials with high prices being paid for glass, steel and paper (there’s actually a shortage for recycled glass!) and it appears that the White House has begun to realise the significant correlation between the price of oil and the cost for recycle.

During our last day at the congress, the cost of oil hit \$70 a barrel – fall out from the hurricane and an all time high. The keynote speaker on this day just happened to be from the White House and responsible for the US Environmental Protection Agency. He drew reference to the new energy bill that has recently been passed by congress. In it, a domestic recycling rate target of 38% has been set to be reached by 2008. They've also committed to ensure that red tape does not hinder further development of the recycling markets – something that WRAP has also committed to over here.

Whether greater recycling is driven by the future cost of oil or an increased sense of civic duty remains to be seen. With experts predicting another two hurricanes hitting America by the end of 2005 and the continued unrest in the Middle East, we suspect, as with most things, it's economics that will stimulate change. But there is a sense of widespread civic virtue that recycling brings across many parts of the US and with some excellent schemes already in place, great results already being achieved and support starting to emanate out of Washington, then there's every possibility that America could become one of, if not 'the' most prolific recycling nations on the planet.

Since returning, we've been asked by a few people "whose better at waste management, us or them?" It's not a question that can easily be answered. In some areas, they are woefully behind what we're doing here in the UK yet in others, they are strides ahead. And as was pointed out in the opening paragraph, there are some areas where you simply cannot draw an accurate comparison.

In the UK, we often tend to look across the English Channel for ideas. From what we saw in Minneapolis, we could do with looking a bit more frequently across the Atlantic. After all, who'd say no to 80% recycling?

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