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Product Stewardship Institute Teams with Long Islanders to Clean Up Aquatic Trash

PSI is serving as the eateries' advisor with a particular emphasis on reaching disadvantaged and minority-owned business enterprises.

Arlene Karidis | Jan 13, 2017



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The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI), a nonprofit committed to reducing the impacts of consumer products, is working with local eateries in the North Fork of Long Island, N.Y., to help them cut their use of single-use plastics and, ultimately, divert aquatic trash from eastern Long Island waters.

In addition to reducing plastic pollution and cleaning up local beaches, the Aquatic Trash Prevention (ATP) program aims to improve waste generators' bottom lines and to demonstrate how other businesses can do the same.

Collaborating with multiple restaurant venues and local tourism boards,

PSI hopes to turn around a big problem: seven of the top 10 contributors to aquatic trash are single-use plastics, according to the Ocean Conservancy. This waste has wreaked havoc on eastern Long Island for decades, killing marine life, wrapping around boat propellers and clogging engine cooling water.

PSI is serving as the eateries' advisor with a particular emphasis on reaching disadvantaged and minority-owned business enterprises.

"[T]hey struggle the most and stand to gain the most," says Megan Byers, PSI's associate for policy and outreach programs. "Sustainable practices can save them money but don't necessarily require large investments. It could be changes as simple as giving out straws only when customers request them, or switching from one-time use plastic plates to ceramic plates,"

Through its ATP program, PSI will help businesses transition to sustainability practices. The team will provide tips on how to reduce plastic footprint, including identifying reusable, compostable or recyclable alternatives to plastics. It will also analyze the financial and environmental cost benefits of switching to alternatives.

Participating businesses will receive \$1,500 to help finance costs associated with transitioning to a source reduction plan—for instance investing in dishwashers or launching campaigns to educate their customers.

On a larger scale, PSI will focus on helping to develop collection infrastructure, creating business procurement policies to minimize or eliminate disposable plastics and developing model municipal and tourism board policies that provide options for plastic reduction.

The goal is to create source reduction plans for participating businesses by May 2017 and to implement them this summer. By the fall PSI will develop procurement policies based on the results of the pilot and will create model municipal and organizational policies in coordination with local governments.

"Ultimately, we plan to complete a toolkit to help other businesses in the region and across the country replicate the successes of this project, through lessons learned," says Scott Cassel, executive director and founder of PSI.

This new initiative builds on PSI's source reduction work at [California universities](#) and the [source reduction toolkit](#) for colleges and universities

Some of the focus of the current project has been on getting businesses to buy into change—something many see as risky to their bottom lines.

"We hope to show reduction in plastics can mesh with what they are doing and help them discover ways they may not have thought of to help reduce their operational cost and environmental impact," says Byers.

Then there is the potential for competitive advantage.

"Both customers and employees like to know that the businesses where they work and frequent care about the community. This is a way to show that they do," says Cassel.

The project is funded by a grant from US EPA Region 2 in New York and New Jersey as well as money raised by PSI.

and their list of collaborative partners,” says Drew Youngs, environmental analyst, NEIWPCC.

The team is as focused on research as on helping develop best practices. Targeting multiple eatery types, this project will contribute quantitative data (cost savings, pounds of waste avoided, number of disposables avoided, time saved) and testimonial intended to validate that any business can integrate plastics source reduction into their operation.

Another project component is surveys to identify types, quantity and origin of plastic beach debris to better understand who to target to cut waste, and how to best do it—and ultimately to take their work further than Long Island.

“We hope that this project can be replicated throughout the New York region and nationally,” says Cassel.

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even hands-free cell phone use behind the wheel.

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As mobile devices and apps — and everyday use and growing reliance on them — have spread at a pace rabbits and bacteria might envy, fleets have been acting to curb distracted driving in their trucks. The U.S. Dept. of Transportation's (DOT) bans on texting and hand-held cell phone use while operating commercial motor vehicles since 2010 and 2012, respectively, are advancing those efforts.

Meanwhile, faced with big hikes in insurance premiums and both fraudulent and legitimate lawsuits following collisions, motor carriers also want to eliminate any accidents they can. DOT data shows that in 2015, fatalities on America's roadways grew by 8%, the largest year-over-year increase in half a century — and everywhere you look, all fingers seem to point at distracted driving.



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When it comes to distracted driving, some fleets are now going farther than what's required by law, like prohibiting even hands-free cell phone use behind the wheel where such calls are perfectly legal. Is all the fuss really warranted, and is banning things like cell phone use of any kind while driving the best way to approach this problem?

Technology: Culprit and solution

On one hand, cell phones and other mobile, Internet-connected devices are what anti-distracted driving laws target most, and they've come to define distracted driving in the Information Age. At the same time, technology is also helping solve this problem: passenger cars and commercial vehicles alike are touting advanced tech-like lane departure and condition-based risky speed warnings or automatic braking to avoid collisions. Third-party developers are offering driver-monitoring systems designed to spot and guard against distracted driving.

Even as DOT is pressing voluntary guidelines for in-vehicle and mobile devices to limit technology's potential for distraction, the agency has just proposed a new rule requiring and laying the groundwork for vehicle-to-vehicle, or V2V, safety message communications. DOT claims V2V technology — that is, vehicles wirelessly communicating things like their speed, direction and coordinates to each other — could drive advanced safety functions like autonomous braking and could help avoid “hundreds of thousands” of collisions every year.

Thus technology has become like the humorous old illustrations of conscience: picture devil and angel figures on either shoulder of the driver. To be sure, no one advocates driving distracted. But the reality is that, depending on how you define it, just about any action by a driver that's secondary to eyes forward, hands at 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock, and attention fully on the task of driving itself could be considered a distraction. A “distraction threshold” commonly cited is 2 seconds or more looking away from the road.

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pipeline injection equipment.

Arlene Karidis | Feb 07, 2017



Wisconsin's Dane County has made electricity from waste for the local utility for decades, but may soon shift to a new plan—new to Dane and novel for the disposal niche at large. The county board is considering an \$18 million upgrade to produce pipeline quality gas for the grid.

It's hard to say how the project will pencil out financially because of an uncertain regulatory environment and energy market price fluctuations. So the county is taking a long look before spending the approved \$18 million for the gas cleanup technology and pipeline injection equipment that would enable it to tap into an interstate pipeline. But it is anything but risk adverse, says John Welch, solid waste manager at Dane County Public Works.

Depending on the market, there could be a complete return on the investment within five years, and then the county could start turning a profit. On its current contract, the utility is losing money, with a bigger hit anticipated if it is renewed at its current terms.

“Our agreement with the utility ends in two years and we will be offered 3.5 or 4 cents per kilowatt rather than 7 or 9 cents. It costs us about 3.5 cents per kilowatt to produce the power,” Welch says. “And while capital costs vary, they are generally several million dollars.”

The biggest payback to upgrade would likely come from two sources: the value from federally allocated renewable energy credits, known as RINs (renewal identification number), and revenue from selling fuel to companies that own compressed natural gas (CNG) stations.

“We started looking at what's out there, and we are seeing more projects moving away from electricity and shifting into cleaning up gas to inject in the pipeline,” Welch says. “Cleaner fuels get paid more per gallon, so I see the value of low-carbon fuel credits [to incentivize large energy consumers] increasing and becoming more valuable.”

Gaining solid footing in this alternative energy niche will take work, as it means competing with natural gas producers. That means they will have to get their product into a large transmission pipeline to get it to CNG stations.

Dane is looking closely at leveraging credits available through the federal Renewable Fuel Standards program. Large oil companies are also buying the credits to meet their requirements as far as the percentage of fuel that must come from renewable sources.

“These RINs would be the largest portion of the revenue stream, but we are watching this in terms of what policy changes could occur at the federal level and impact the program,” says Welch.

Currently the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sets goals for oil companies as far as the percentage of fuel that must come from renewable energy, but terms could change under the new administration. Some stakeholders are waiting to see if the program continues at all.

The county public works department is also looking closely at another form of credit for renewable energy in one region:

to run, with potential to generate revenues of \$6 million to \$8 million a year. That would translate to \$4 million to \$6 million in profits annually.

Welch's division has hired a consultant to conduct a market analysis to determine potential benefit to taxpayers and has a request for proposal out to determine the exact cost to build and install a system with its specs.

"We will look at systems' capabilities and cost and keep watching what's going on with RINs," says Josh Wescott, chief of staff to the Dane County executive. "We are willing to take a risk if there is potential payback, but we are looking conservatively at that payback."

In its heyday, the operation to convert waste to electricity made millions for taxpayers.

"We believe this new initiative is an opportunity to help county government run smarter and more efficient," Wescott says. "We aren't aware of any other facilities taking on this effort to this scale. But with volatility in crude oil markets and continued awareness about what we're putting into the air, we think projects like this are the future."

The county plans to make a definitive decision on whether to move forward by mid-March.

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