

EPA - R.I.P.

By Jeff Reinke, Editorial Director, Chem.Info

One of the more interesting green developments in recent months has been Wal-Mart's decision to initiate greater sustainability standards in the products they'll purchase and re-sell. I'll abstain from sharing the inter-office banter that has pitted my colleagues Luke and Carrie against me regarding this topic, but instead offer some thoughts on the interesting precedent this could set for processors.

Back in 1970 when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was born, it represented a positive and vitally necessary government entity that helped consolidate several legislative and monitoring bodies, while simultaneously granting some teeth in holding notorious polluters accountable. In some cases, the actions of the EPA were more educational, but perhaps its most important role was simply generating greater notoriety of the wrong-doers. Unfortunately, it soon became another example of a good government initiative that's been poorly executed.

As its reach, power and overall size has grown, so has the EPA's bureaucratic operating dynamics. It's now seemingly filled with fewer individuals actually concerned about ways to "protect human health and to safeguard the natural environment," and more politicians interested in fostering relationships and covering their own backsides. That's why for the better part of the last 15 years the California Air Resources Board (CARB) has been the de facto legislative branch of the U.S. EPA in all things emissions-related. Basically, they let CARB break through any barriers on the West Coast and use that as a gauge for the rest of the country.

These dynamics, along with stronger public sentiment and greater corporate responsibility towards environment issues, is why I think it's time to significantly restructure and refocus the EPA.

As a legislative body it has been constantly weakened by the ability of politicians and lobbyists to do what they do best — make deals that best suit their individual constituency. In some cases this means taking a very strong stand, such as with the use of mercury in industrial applications. But in too many cases, such as REACH and RoHS-like standards in select U.S. geographies and in dealing with air quality issues, they're all too willing to defer to local agencies. I'm not saying these are bad practices, but if these are representative of their SOPs, then why is this agency still considered a viable federal organization with an annual operating budget of nearly \$4 billion?

In my opinion, Wal-Mart hasn't taken their sustainability efforts public in order to showcase an undying love for the planet. They're doing it because they know it will generate overwhelmingly positive good will from consumers and great public relations exposure from the press. So instead of allowing the EPA to gobble up huge

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amounts of taxpayer dollars to effectively waffle on the most pressing issues, I think they could be downsized and used more effectively to simply promote the right- and wrong-doings of companies. This would allow local agencies and corporations to work together in handling any corrective actions. After all, would you buy from a supplier that has been exposed for environmental shortcomings and risk the fallout from your customers?

Compliance is expensive for processors, but not nearly as costly as negative sentiment from those who can impact purchasing decisions or provide influence within their geographic community. So instead of letting the EPA continue in their inconsistent and politically motivated course, maybe it's time to let business police itself a little more. The funds that are left after right-sizing the EPA and transitioning it from a levier of fines to a congressional reporting committee could then be funneled to the processing and manufacturing communities in helping them to resolve their environmental issues. The threat of negative publicity alone would scare any on the cusp of taking environmental shortcuts to stay on the straight and narrow.

While government compliance in some manner will always be necessary, I think we operate in an age in which industry has been educated enough to know the need for and residual benefits of policing themselves. Thanks for the early work, EPA, and your long-term impact, but the time is right to transition your structure and let industry govern itself.

Let me know what you think at jeff.reinke@advantagemedia.com [1].

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