

Watt's Happening?

by Don Pettit

for Peace Energy Cooperative

www.peaceenergy.ca ph 250-782-3882



Recycling Rant



The world is awash in packaging, and so is the author of Watt's Happening. Here he stands in the packaging collected over one year for two people, ready for the recycling depot. Packaging and waste are increasing, not decreasing as promised.

I get grumpy every time I recycle.

Don't get me wrong. Recycling all my glass, paper, metal, plastic and cardboard packaging is the right thing to do. Getting all that useful material and embodied energy out of the landfill and back into useful products is definitely the way to go. But . . .

BUT SOMETHING IS AMISS

I recall the early days of recycling, perhaps 30 years ago. The idea was that recycling would be a temporary measure because industry was going to get its act together and actually reduce packaging, increase efficiency, and thus improve their bottom line while cleaning up the environment. And if they failed

to see the wisdom of this, then governments would step in and legislate it into reality.

But packaging is increasing, not decreasing. The other day I did the energy-smart thing and bought a lovely new LED light bulb. This bulb is so energy efficient and trouble-free that I can probably will it to my descendents. Problem is, it came in half a pound of ultra-thick, heavy-duty indestructible

plastic and cardboard. If the embodied energy in the packaging is taken into account (and my frustrated energy expended trying to get into the darn thing) then without doubt the energy advantage of my wonder-bulb is probably cut in half. Madness.

WHY?

Rather than encouraging industry to reduce packaging, recycling has actually encouraged them to make more by reducing their need to deal with it themselves. Governments, meanwhile (at least in North America, not so in Europe) have stood back at a safe distance and done little or nothing.

This makes recycling not much more than another taxpayer-funded corporate subsidy! We pay billions to transport it, bury it and take care of it while dealing with all the health and environmental impacts caused by its manufacture and disposal.

In this legislative (and common sense) vacuum, packaging has exploded to become a massive industry in itself, in North America almost as big as the products that are packaged. Packaging accounts for 40- 50% of the cost of an item in a throwaway container. Food packaging in the U.S. costs more than the combined net income of all U.S. farmers.

Our oceans are awash in plastic: hundreds of thousands of birds and marine animals are killed each year through ingestion or entanglement in plastic debris. And on and on.

THE ANSWER

Government has to step in, big time. Now. Market forces are not working, or they are taking way, way too long. Those few industries that have seen the light, that are reducing their packaging waste and taking full responsibility for their own waste generation, are seeing marketing and bottom line advantages, but obviously this is not enough to stem the tide. Packaging is increasing. Our landfills continue to overflow. Even the conscientious consumer is forced to deal with more and more of it every day.

Meanwhile, I'll suck it up and keep recycling. By avoiding all the packaging I can (ha, good luck), composting everything I can compost, and recycling everything I can (grumpily) recycle, I have reduced my household waste to about one bag per month. This is a good thing. I will soldier on. You should too.

Although short-term economic goals and jobs are important, I care more about the planet and the long-term mess we're making of it. I care about the good people of this Earth, who care about wildlife, clean air and clean water, forests, rivers and wilderness. I care about quality of life, not quantity.

Next time I vote, I'm voting for somebody who promises to take action on waste – waste of energy and waste of materials. If environmental sanity and human intelligence can't create a robust economy, well then, we're really hooped, aren't we? But I refuse to believe that. It just doesn't make sense.

End of rant.

Quick Fact:

Renewables are the climate change answer:

Clean energy has grown by an impressive 85 percent in just 10 years, while equipment costs continue to plummet. Utilities around the world are scrambling to keep up. Renewable energy is now squarely in the mainstream, but we will still have to double output to head off catastrophic climate disruption. So finds a new report from the International Renewable Energy Agency "*Rethinking Energy*." Step one? Phase out fossil fuel subsidies to level the playing field for renewables.