



Waste Management Program at Natural Resources Canada

By Peter Forsyth

Natural Resources Canada (NRCan) has taken waste management very seriously. In 1989, the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment issued a challenge to all government departments to reduce the amount of waste going to landfill by 50% by the year 2000. NRCan accepted the challenge and took the steps necessary to achieve this goal. As of 1996, it had surpassed the 50% objective at several of its facilities. The most important reason behind NRCan's success was the support it received from top management, which has in turn encouraged employees to embrace the program.

NRCan adopted an aggressive communications strategy to sensitize employees on waste issues and accomplishments, and to encourage their participation which is key to the success of the program. It produces reports and flyers to detail developments in waste management, and posts reminders about what employees can do to improve their home and work environments. The waste management program, called "Waste Free," is managed for the department by the Office of Environmental Affairs (OEA).

NRCan prefaced the introduction of the waste management program by conducting audits at its facilities across Canada. Then, every proposed new initiative is piloted at headquarters. If the results of follow-up audits are encouraging, the program is expanded to other facilities in the National Capital Region (NCR) and eventually to regional facilities.

The solid waste management program revolves around the 3Rs and is all-encompassing with very few waste products not considered. In 1995, the initial phase introduced multi-material bins. These bins allow for the collection and separation of waste materials into six streams: clear glass, coloured glass, aluminum/metal, mixed papers, rigid plastics, and plastic film/styrofoam. They complement the deskside blue basket program known as "PaperSave", where employees were issued blue baskets to collect higher quality paper. As well, NRCan implemented a household heavy metal recycling system, whereby employees can dispose of a variety of used batteries including lithium, alkaline, NiCd, and rechargeable power packs. Fluorescent tubes are also collected as part of the same program. By 1996, the amount of waste being diverted from the landfill had reached 60%.

A previous audit had demonstrated that only 2% of waste should be considered "true" waste. As a result, NRCan decided to attempt to achieve higher diversion rates. Enhanced Waste Free was introduced on three floors at headquarters in 1996. This phase consists of desktop mini bins being substituted for the deskside black waste basket. At the same time, a second smaller multi-material unit was added to capture the food waste and used toner cartridges. The responsibility of managing waste now falls to the individual. Cleaning staff pick up the contents of the blue basket once a week and employees are required to take their remaining waste to the central waste recycling station. This phase has produced remarkable results. According to a follow-up audit, 93% of the waste is being diverted from the landfill. NRCan, in the National Capital Region, also has a growing composting program, collecting food waste from its headquarters and cafeterias. In total, it is presently sending 1.3 tonnes of food waste per month to a regional composting facility.

Future steps include the expansion of the composting program in the National Capital Region. A program to collect unwanted compact disks (CDs) for recycling will be enhanced. Regional offices will also be the focus of attention through 1998. As regional circumstances often differ from those found in the NCR, customized programs will have to be devised.