

Ask Eartha: Who's being held responsible for creating waste? (column)

Eartha StewardAsk Eartha

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Dear Eartha,

Why aren't manufacturers and businesses being held responsible for their part in creating waste? The consumer doesn't ask for packaging. I must say I'm becoming resentful of the fact that all the blame and effort is put on the consumer. Manufacturers are responsible for a very large part of the waste that we, as consumers deal with. How can we put more of this responsibility on the manufactures and sellers so that we can buy the things we need without being told that we are creating all the waste?

-Kathy, Frisco

I truly understand your frustration, Kathy. While we have collectively caused the waste and atmospheric conditions that have led to climate change, we are taught that the solution to this is to take an individualized approach to reduce waste and carbon emissions. But our consumeristic society has manipulated us into thinking that by recycling, composting or riding our bike will solve all our environmental issues. The average American creates 4.5 pounds of trash daily. Even if you got that number down to zero through composting and recycling, municipal waste only accounts for 3 percent of all waste produced annually. Between 93-97 percent of waste comes from industry and businesses.

Does that mean that we need to place all the blame on industry? Well, yes and no. We as consumers should share the responsibility with industry and business. After all, we create the demand for products through the purchases we make. It could be argued that business and industry are simply responding to consumer demand. However, as a consumer you vote with your dollars and feedback.

Extended Producer Responsibility, or Product Stewardship, is a strategy that places a shared responsibility for end-of-life management of consumer products on the manufacturers of the products, while encouraging product design that minimizes negative impacts on human health and the environment at every stage of the product's lifecycle, according to EcoCycle in Boulder. Over the course of the last few years, the U.S. has begun adopting aspects of EPR to certain products, but we still have a long way to go as a nation. Currently, EPR standards are most commonly applied to electronics and products containing toxic chemicals like paint and fluorescent tubes, and the brunt of the expense associated with disposal falls on local governments. EPR restores fairness to the system by requiring product manufacturers to share in the cost of disposing the harmful items they create.

The first step you can take to encourage product stewardship is to refuse to purchase items that come with an unnecessary amount of packaging or are toxic to the environment. This can even occur after the purchase is made. Don't like the abnormally large box that an unnamed online retailer sent you? Simply write "Refuse" on the box, and have it returned — for free. Then be sure to send them feedback about the refused item. Or when you are in the store, and realize that the item you want to purchase is a box wrapped in plastic, inside of a box, perhaps choose a similar item with less packaging. Send your consumer "vote" to producers by purchasing products that have less of the unwanted stuff.

The next step you can take is to locally ban specific items that do damage. For instance, the town of Breckenridge, and many other towns across the world, have banned the single-use plastic bag. Other towns have banned Styrofoam. Product bans make a statement that a local area does not accept a "disposable society," and sends a strong message to product manufacturers that their misuse of resources is not tolerated. Banning a product usually means that an environmentally friendly option will come to be used instead, making the ban impactful.

Finally, you can also take action on a state and national level. The Colorado Product Steward Council works to promote waste minimization, reuse, recycling and sustainable recovery, and drive improvements in product design that promote environmental sustainability here in Colorado. Nationally, there are two organizations working on EPR: the Product Policy Institute and Product Stewardship Institute. You can visit their websites to track producer responsibility legislation across the country, learn what's happening with product stewardship for specific priority products, attend webinars and conference calls to advance producer responsibility, and more.

Kathy, thank you so much for your concerns regarding manufacturer responsibility. We do have a voice when it comes to consuming, but it will require action and diligence on our parts.

Ask Eartha Steward is written by the staff at the High Country Conservation Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to waste reduction and resource conservation. Submit questions to Eartha at info@highcountryconservation.org (mailto:info@highcountryconservation.org).