

RESOURCE EFFICIENCY: A GOVERNMENT PERSPECTIVE

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Thank you Mr. Chair and thank you to both OECD and UNEP for inviting me to speak on this panel. And hello to many friends from the U.S. and other countries who share a commitment to the challenge of sustainable resource management. This challenge is real and it demands our attention and energy on a global scale.

As you heard, I am a career employee of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and I have been there since my hair was dark brown. I have also had the privilege of participating on several OECD groups on material flows, sustainable materials management and resource efficiency/ productivity and have worked in other international fora such as the G8 3Rs Initiative.

I was asked to speak about the “Government Perspective.” There is, of course, no one “Government Perspective.” We are facing a challenge that is becoming increasingly global with governments that are national, provincial and local, all of which work differently. Governments see things differently for many reasons. Even within a government there are always different perspectives. If we do things right, this diversity can be good, just as diverse species usually make an ecosystem more robust and able to confront different types of challenges.

We must do things right. In this spirit I want to offer three points that ought to apply to all governments and which all of us – in and out of government – would do well to explore throughout this conference. The three points are about vision, humility and innovation.

First, we need to share a common sense of the challenges and a vision of where we need to move. Our vision should be to find new ways to meet the needs of a growing population and flourish – not just manage or get by and not just some of the people and not others – by using materials much more productively than we do now, looking at the whole life cycle. Making big changes in how we do things is a tall order, but nothing less will do. It is also in our grasp.

I mention this first because I don’t think there is a vision shared widely by the many stakeholders and we need one. The reality in public policy is that issues compete with others for attention. I don’t see governments arguing against resource efficiency, but I do see people in governments who focus primarily on a piece of the issue, such as extraction or waste, and others who simply focus on other issues entirely. They don’t see the full, global life cycle system and

the vision we are talking about and what it offers, and without a common vision it is hard to go very far on a job as big as we have here, nationally and internationally.

Fortunately, a growing number of people in business and civil society do “get it” and can help. With their help, governments can help people understand and get enthusiastic about a vision and can play a key leadership role in realizing the vision. That is why this conference is important. If nothing else, I hope we all go home with a shared vision and enlist others in it.

My second point is that while governments must play a key role, we must be humble about the role that governments can play. Governments are only a part of the picture. Billions of people around the world make choices everyday that affect resource use. We need strong regulations for some things, but even if all governments had statutes that gave them supreme regulatory authority, there is still no way that governments could directly control more than a tiny fraction of the choices that individuals, businesses, government organizations at all levels and organizations of other types are making all the time. We need to work with the market, have supportive framework conditions and do more, all with vision and innovation. We need to ask a great deal of government, but we need to ask even more of all the parties whose actions affect how we collectively use resources. Armed with a suitable vision, governments can encourage other stakeholders to see their roles differently and act accordingly.

Several years ago a task force of senior career officials at EPA published a report, *Everyday Choices: Opportunities for Environmental Stewardship*. In it we proposed a vision:

“As our population and economy continue to expand, the U.S. can accelerate environmental progress while simultaneously strengthening our global competitiveness. In short, we have exciting opportunities to create a more sustainable future in this country and with our partners around the world. However, this bold goal cannot be accomplished by government alone; rather it requires the active engagement of all people. To this end, we have a vision of environmental stewardship – where all parts of society actively take responsibility to improve environmental quality and achieve sustainable results.”

The report noted that environmental stewardship is on the rise in all parts of society. (Indeed, to make a personal observation, the shift in attitudes and actions by business is one of the biggest changes I have seen in the environmental world in my career. I’m excited by what I see.) The report went on to detail a number of actions that the agency can take to encourage this movement even further – focusing on priority problems, engaging individuals, showcasing best practices, EPA leading by example, and mainstreaming stewardship ideas into agency decision processes.

My third and final point is that in this situation we must be very creative and innovative and use all the tools that are available to us. The issues are larger and more complex than any one material, industry, ministry, type of policy or country.

This is a big topic and I won’t try to cover it all, but I will take the opportunity to share a bit of thinking and experience from the U.S. EPA.

Many of you are familiar with at least some of what we are doing and you will have several chances to hear from my EPA colleagues at this conference about some of the details in this conference – strong regulations, partnerships, product stewardship, our Resource Conservation Challenge, the Green Suppliers Network, our work with retailers, Energy Star, Design for Environment, encouraging technology innovation, Environmental Management Systems, Environmental Education and making the agency a showcase for green operations, to name just a few of the dozens I could list. Although we are not yet ready to set many targets for resource efficiency, our EPA Strategic Plan contains dozens of carefully crafted environmental targets – some on recycling – and we track our progress. We work with our Department of Commerce on issues of remanufacturing and trade. We partner with the U.S. Geological Survey, also represented at this conference, particularly on information tasks.

Speaking of information, all that we do to promote resource efficiency must rest on a solid foundation of information. If you haven't seen the latest OECD work on material flows and sustainable resource management you should. Many of the people who contributed to this effort are here today and will be describing it in Module 1 tomorrow. The work is very good, but it is just a start. There are many more things we ought to do with information about resources and materials using 21st Century information tools – a topic big enough for its own conversation.

At EPA we are endeavoring to incorporate the sustainable materials and resource approach into our programs. As illustrated by efforts I mentioned a moment ago, we are making progress but we still have a ways to go. To few people's surprise, we are finding that this task is not simple. It is easy to say that the only way to get ahead of waste issues is to expand our approach from waste management to materials management and that we should begin working in new ways with a far broader set of stakeholders who affect many points of the life cycles of materials. It's another thing to make it happen, first in government and then in society at large. I know that we share this challenge with governments and stakeholders in other nations.

Changing like this is hard for an agency such as EPA, with 17,000 people running many different programs. In 2002 we discussed this issue in our environmental innovation strategy. We noted that innovation requires “each individual to view his or her job more broadly – as an environmental problem-solver, a partner, a facilitator, and a leader, not solely a program implementer.” Anyone who has worked in government, which includes many friends in this room, will understand that this is not easy. But that just means we have to work harder.

This is a “government perspective.” We need to be unyielding in our determination to create a common vision and think humbly and innovatively about our roles. I hope we can explore these ideas further in each of the conference sessions over the next several days.

Thank you! Merci!