

GM's Waste Reduction Efforts Focus on Reusing Materials

GM is pushing to develop zero-waste facilities to help the environment and, say GM officials, because it just makes good business sense.

GM released its blueprint Oct. 19 summarizing its waste-reduction efforts and its global landfill-free program efforts.

John Bradburn, manager of GM's waste reduction efforts, said the company during 2011 set itself the goal of achieving 100 landfill-free manufacturing sites and 25 non-manufacturing sites by 2020.

As of September 2012, GM has achieved landfill-free status at 83 manufacturing sites and 19 non-manufacturing locations globally.

GM has more landfill-free facilities and recycles more waste from its worldwide facilities than any other automaker.

"This is important because sustainability of such a program is about it making financial sense," Bradburn said.

"Waste reduction has three aspects. The first is the social aspect, the second is environmental and the third is the financial benefit. They are all important."

Bradburn said GM believes going for zero-waste is not just important for GM, but for other companies as well, which is why GM shared its methods.

"We've been working with Delphi," Bradburn said. "They're interested in implementing a similar program at many of their plants. We feel strongly about sharing what we know and have learned."

One way GM has been able to reduce waste is to rethink how the company looks at what many call waste, Bradburn said. Instead of looking at byproducts produced at plants as waste, GM tries to look at it as commodities. By finding another purpose for these commodities, waste is eliminated and money is saved.

"We like to say that waste is just a commodity that's out of place," Bradburn said.

Bradburn said the question of repurposing and recycling byproducts is an interesting subject to the public.

"Everybody generates waste, whether at their homes or their businesses," he said. "People want

to know how they can save money and reduce household costs. They know what this subject is about because they manage it every day in their own lives."

GM will continue to try to improve its efficiencies in terms of eliminating waste, Bradburn said, through the use of recycling and reuse. The most efficient path is to reuse byproducts. If you recycle something, you have to spend money, fuel and time, say, melting down scrap metal and molding it into something else that can be used.

But if you find a way to reuse something, you can save a lot of steps.

"I'm talking about reusing a pallet as a pallet instead of grinding it down and using the remains as something else. We call this moving these commodities up the hierarchy ladder.

"The question is can we manage these processes by eliminating all forms of waste. Can we become even more efficient? Becoming landfill-free is our benchmark, our goal to achieve. We want to reduce our environmental burden."

But it must do so in a way that makes financial sense, Bradburn said. At times, GM has reduced its waste by making it a resource for cycled-content products. If a project is not cost-neutral or revenue-generating, he said, a company should rethink it.

GM has generated \$2.5 billion in revenue between 2007 and 2010 through various recycling activities. It now approximates its annual byproduct recycling and reuse revenue at about \$1 billion a year, made possible through using a holistic GM byproducts management system that combines environmental and financial benefits of all plant materials.

One example, Bradburn said, can be seen at the Pontiac Metal Center, which resulted in the generation of \$7.5 million in recycling revenue, including metals, in 2011 alone.

Another example of repurposing something is how Chevrolet Volt battery covers can now be put to a new use. The covers can be used as nest structures for bats and wood ducks.

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