

California pushes carpet industry to recycle

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While the United States and California are on the same continent, the Trump and Brown administrations are on different planets when it comes to environmental policy. One planet is inhabited by large corporations whose profits are threatened by government regulations. The other planet is populated with people.

On Planet Trump, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Energy Department are being handed over to industry polluters. Meanwhile, on Planet California, the state is fining carpet manufacturers for failing to comply with California's product stewardship program. (See "Swept under the rug," page 8.)

On other continents, including Europe, product stewardship programs that make manufacturers responsible for their waste products are common and effective. Not surprisingly, if manufacturers pay the cost of recycling their products, they will design their products to reduce recycling costs.

Here in California, the major driving force behind the concept of manufacturer responsibility is the California Product Stewardship Council, led by longtime Executive Director Heidi Sanborn. With four staff people in a small office on 21st Street, Sanborn has put together a self-described "network of local governments, nongovernment organizations, businesses and individuals supporting policies and projects where producers share in the responsibility for managing problem products at end of life."

Our company has produced numerous publications for CPSC, so I know Sanborn, CPSC Board Chair Doug Kobold and many other members of her network. Their efforts have pushed various California agencies, such as Cal Recycle, to take on the carpet, paint, pharmaceutical, mattress and other billion-dollar industries. For example:

California's worn-out carpets are a major contributor to the Golden State's landfills. The cost of maintaining the landfills is paid by California taxpayers. In 2010, the state worked out an agreement with the carpet industry to run a stewardship recycling program, Carpet America Recovery Effort, that would be monitored by the state. The carpet industry would develop its own plan to meet the goals. Sounds good, right?

But the carpet industry feared that if the plan was successful in California it would spread throughout the country. So they determined to screw it up. They added a ridiculously low fee to carpet sales—5 cents per square yard—to be paid by consumers. (This fee has recently been raised to 25 cents—still not enough.)

Because the fee was so low, the money available to pay for the program was paltry, and the subcontractors hired to pick up the carpet and recycle it frequently just collected it and let it pile up. The carpet industry didn't monitor the program and much of the collected carpet was never recycled. It ended up in our landfills.

The carpet industry did not come close to reaching its goals. In recent years, the percentage of carpet being recycled actually went down. The carpet industry never operated in good faith; they sabotaged their own program, they failed to monitor their subcontractors, and clearly they had no interest in being responsible corporate partners.

But thanks to the California Product Stewardship Council keeping the spotlight on these issues, CalRecycle is levying fines on the carpet industry and will require them to revamp their program.

This is one example of why the California Product Stewardship Council's work is so important. We are extremely fortunate to have this dedicated, passionate group of public servants working on our behalf. I am proud to live on Planet California.



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