

5.12 Waste management and hazardous substances

5.12.1 Introduction

The *New Zealand Waste Strategy 2002* identifies “waste” as any material – solid, liquid or gas – that is unwanted and/or unvalued, and discarded or discharged by its owner. Thus, one person’s waste might still be able to be used by someone else, recycled into something else or, as in the case of methane from landfills, used as an energy source. From a long-term sustainable management perspective, the more waste we throw away, the more we are wasting limited resources. We have not “made the most” of the original resources that went into a product.

The *Regional Policy Statement for the Wellington Region 1995* and the *New Zealand Waste Strategy* both promote what has been termed the “waste management hierarchy”. Reduce, re-use and recycle are the first three of five steps in the hierarchy and are relatively well known. The fourth step is to recover resources from waste – e.g. green waste for composting and landfill gas as a source of energy. The last step is safe disposal of what remains after the first four steps have been taken.

Are we all taking these steps? Are we giving the first ones the highest priority or are we hopping around, taking one or two steps but not others? Will we trip up if we don’t take the right steps?

Continuing to throw large amounts of solid waste away is evidence that resources are still not being used efficiently and that more could be done to follow the steps in the waste hierarchy. Liquid waste is now better treated before it is disposed of, but 200,000 cubic metres of sewage effluent is still put into coastal and fresh water systems in the region every day.

5.12.2 How successful has the Regional Policy Statement been?

The first objective in the waste management and hazardous substances chapter of the *Regional Policy Statement* is that we reduce the quantity of waste. The second and connected objective seeks that the reduction is achieved by re-use, recycling and resource recovery. Greater Wellington’s state of the



environment report, *Measuring up 2005*, indicates that both objectives are showing some small level of achievement, but there is still large scope for improvement.

Only 20 per cent of recyclable materials are recycled and, while there has been a slight drop in the total of solid waste taken to landfills, most landfills are filling up and some areas are intending to “export” their waste to other parts of New Zealand. Hazardous waste is often sent off-shore to countries capable of disposing of it safely – put bluntly, the region is exporting the problem.

The majority of waste put in landfills in the region is commercial, so even if we do our best as individuals, we must target the management of commercial waste if we want to decrease annual landfill volumes.

Objectives 3 and 4 in the waste management and hazardous substances chapter are about managing the effects of disposal of solid and liquid waste and hazardous substances. There has been some improvement in the number of landfills meeting the necessary environmental standards in recent years,

but there are still problems associated with leachate from closed landfills. For some sewage discharges, there is poor compliance with resource consents and “permitted activities” standards.

Regional councils and city and district councils have identical functions for controlling the use of land for the transportation, storage, use and disposal of hazardous substances. The *Resource Management Act 1991* (RMA) requires Regional Policy Statements to allocate who is responsible for specifying the objectives, policies and methods for this function. The way these were allocated in the current Regional Policy Statement is set out at the end of this chapter.

5.12.3 What’s changed and what are the waste management and hazardous substances issues now and for the future?

Since the Regional Policy Statement became operative in 1995, waste management responsibilities have been spelled out by changes to the *Local Government Act 1974* to provide clear guidance to city and district councils on how to manage waste in their areas. They must prepare waste management plans which must describe the measures needed to implement the waste management hierarchy. However, waste management plans do not have to conform to or be consistent with provisions in the Regional Policy Statement and there is no penalty if plans do not meet their own targets.

In 2004, the Ministry for the Environment introduced a National Environmental Standard requiring greenhouse gases from landfills of over 1 million tonnes capacity to be collected and destroyed (or utilised). The Ministry is now also working on New Zealand-wide programmes to reduce waste (e.g. the *New Zealand Packaging Accord 2004 – 2009* is a voluntary initiative for industry and government to take a more sustainable approach to packaging).

A 2005 amendment to the RMA placed new functions on regional councils and city and district councils for contaminated land. Regional councils are responsible for the investigation of land to identify and monitor contaminated land, while city and district councils control the subdivision, use and development of such land (refer to **soils** for more information about contaminated land).

So, although some responsibilities have changed, are the core issues facing waste management very different from what they were in 1995? From *Measuring up 2005*, the current issues include the following:

- Like everywhere else in New Zealand, we throw away a lot of material that still could be used. Paper, plastic and glass are the obvious examples but nutrients in our liquid waste are another wasted resource and one that can cause problems in the environment.
- Approximately 80 per cent of potentially recyclable material is still going to landfills. However, while there is scope for improvement, there is also an uncertain and changeable market for recycled materials.
- There is still considerable potential to divert green waste, reducing demands on landfills and the production of greenhouse gas emissions
- Only three landfills collect gas from decomposition and only two of these use it for fuel.
- Leachate from closed landfills may be an issue in some parts of the region.
- Not all councils collect hazardous waste
- While a growing number of landfills and sewage treatment works are complying with their resource consent conditions, many are not, with consequent environmental impacts.
- Community concerns, particularly Maori concerns, about sewage discharges are not well addressed in assessments of resource consent applications.

5.12.4 Comments and questions for you to consider

Waste management is primarily the responsibility of city and district councils. The role of the Regional Policy Statement is to identify significant resource management issues for the region, and then propose policies and methods for dealing with these issues. Key considerations, therefore, are whether waste management is a significant resource management issue and, secondly, what added value the Regional Policy Statement might provide for waste management in the region.

Question 1:

Do you think we have identified the right waste management issues? Are there other issues that we should recognise for the region?

Question 2:

How effective do you feel waste management practice has been during the last decade? What have been the main influences on our regional waste management performance? How might we further encourage the good influences?

Question 3:

Do you see a role for the Regional Policy Statement in waste management for the region in the future? Can all the issues be addressed by the New Zealand Waste Strategy and waste management plans for each district?

Question 4:

Would there be any benefits if the Regional Policy Statement dealt with waste management by considering it with related urban activity policy areas, such as provisions that address the built environment, transportation, infrastructure, and energy? Similarly, could the effects of waste management practice be properly addressed in the “receiving environment” chapters, such as fresh water, coastal environment, air and soil?

Question 5:

Is the allocation of responsibilities for the control of the use of land for the prevention or mitigation of any adverse effects of the storage, use, disposal or transportation of hazardous substances set out in the current Regional Policy Statement (and shown below) appropriate?

	Responsibilities for developing objectives	Responsibilities for developing policies	Responsibilities for developing methods
Coastal marine Area	GW	GW	GW
Beds of lakes and rivers	GW	GW	GW
Other land	GW* TA	GW* TA	GW TA*

GW = Greater Wellington Regional Council TA = Territorial authorities (district and city councils)
* = Primary responsibility