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On the Road

I've spent most of the past two months living out of a suitcase attending SWANA's Landfill Gas Symposium in Austin, TX, WasteExpo in Chicago, IL, SWANA's Landfill Symposium in West Palm Beach, FL, and the rest of the time in Europe--Turkey, Denmark, Sweden, Germany, and Holland--looking at how others approach and handle their solid waste. With each stop on my itinerary, I was presented not only with the opportunity to learn from others but to gain a new and broader perspective of our own activities in the process. Though I intend to go into greater depth on each of these experiences in subsequent issues, I'd like to share some of the highlights while they're still fresh in my mind.

Reaping the Whirlwind?

This year's WasteExpo seems to me to be living proof that diligence, hard work, and uncompromising fidelity to the guys with the checkbook are bound to be rewarded. In recent years, as I see it the show's message to small haulers has been, "sell your business now before the money runs out." It's been an admonition taken to heart by more than just a few of those who used to be part of the show's passing parade. The watchword at this year's event was "consolidation," a strategy geared to replace Main Street with Wall Street in cities and towns throughout the country to the benefit of managers and investors in the half-dozen or so vertically-integrated super haulers. While consolidation may mean big bucks to some, WasteExpo's organizers did not seem to be among its immediate beneficiaries. Not only did the show space seem smaller to many of us than in recent years, attendance appeared to have dropped off significantly as well. Most people with whom I spoke identified consolidation as the operative force. Not only has the number of small hauler numbers been reduced, but recent the wave of consolidation likely spells trouble for many manufacturers in our industry as well. Companies "consolidate" - join together - to make more money, which happens by (a) spending less, and/or (b) charging more. Seeking out all possible efficiencies in an effort to improve the bottom line, it's realistic to expect some major jobs to be cut in the impacted organisations and a similar reduction in capital expenditures. They'll buy less equipment and sell off used equipment that is viewed as "redundant." big guys have made it clear they intend to consolidate on the number of equipment suppliers as well--a decision that does not bode well for manufacturers who are not part of the select circle. Many exhibitors expressed the belief that the public sector, now back into the marketplace and competing for business "big time," offers a more fertile grounds for their sales efforts.

Bioreactivity Comes to the Fore

The bulk of the presentations and discussions at SWANA's Third Annual Landfill Symposium focused on the many advantages of bioreactive landfill strategies, calling attention to such topics as increased gas yield, promotion of rapid settlement and stabilization, continuing reduction of volume and improved quality of leachate, transformation of inorganic and resistant organic constituents, and the early conversion of land use to beneficial purposes. Between sessions, discussions ranged out into such areas topics as space and capacity reuse, the possibility of having reclaimable materials count toward diversion goals, and the potential for creating aerobic bioreactive landfills. As co-sponsor of the event, *MSW Management* was pleased by the quality of the presentations and the enthusiastic response of attendees, both of which point to the continuing need for such high-level get-togethers.

Global Perspective

The purpose of meeting with solid waste professionals in Europe was to gain an increased understanding of their approach to MSW management, the programs and techniques they've developed, and challenges they face. I had gone into the meetings believing I had a handle on the differences between our systems and theirs. My vision was based on an assumption that theirs--more expensive and requiring a high degree of public participation--depended on the imposition of semi-draconian governmental policies rather than popular will. Thankfully, the folly of my thinking was exposed early enough in the proceedings to prevent me from opening my mouth to show off my stupidity. What became increasing clear throughout was that the main differences lie not in the means and methods with which they deal with trash but in (1) the high degree of interest and knowledge citizens have in the civic matters and (2) their innate belief in their governmental institutions and those who guard them.

Contrast that with what we find in the US, where the public right to ignorance on civic issues is maintained with religious fervor and government is viewed as the enemy. Fair or not, how difficult is it to fault such attitudes in the light of such questionable actions as EPA's recent initiative to lower the standards for landfill post-closure financial responsibility? What amazes me is how well we stack up against Europe given the level of public apathy and cynicism toward authority MSW managers are forced to buck. The answer as I see it lies in the industry and dedication of the men and women who operate and manage our waste systems without benefit of appreciation for their efforts or sound and comprehensive policy guidance from on high. You deserve high praise for your efforts, and I for one am proud to call attention to your many successes.