

## **Finding a Useful Horizon**

Perhaps the most challenging task for an aviator is maintaining the “big picture” in the midst of a welter of details competing for attention. While it’s important to pay attention to the minutia of flight—altitude, air speed, heading, fuel, power setting, present position, and half-a-hundred other data points—those things are peripheral to the real task at hand. Military pilots are graded most severely on their “situational awareness,” referring to the presence of mind to know at all times—well, most of the time—what it takes to accomplish the mission and hopefully make it back home in one piece.

This is what we have in mind with *Elements 2000*. We’re looking to focus attention on some of the factors that make up this situational awareness in waste management by looking beyond the things that make us janitors of the industrial age and allow us to become custodians of a critical public trust. Sure it’s the day-to-day stuff that takes the majority of our attention, but all too rarely do we find ourselves in a position to fashion responses that take us beyond the next in a seemingly endless succession of challenges.

At the same time it does us little good to look for the pie in the sky. We need to pick and choose horizons appropriate to the challenges. We must look for opportunities to set in motion the kinds of responses that will influence long-range outcomes—for instance, establishing a bioreactive landfill environment appropriate to accelerate waste degradation.

Each element—collection, processing, diverting, disposing, or administering to tick off the major functions of waste management—has its own list of existing conditions, but each contains a library of emerging issues that could impact the way we conduct our business. How well we’re able to anticipate and isolate these may help us determine not only the level, but the character of their impacts as well. Indeed, the more lead-time we have to deal with challenges, the more apt we are to turn them to our advantage.

## **The Bifocal Vision**

Waste managers are charged first and foremost with getting today’s trash off the street and processed in some sort of orderly fashion that keeps it out of the sight, sound, and smell of those very same folks who dumped it. Just to make certain that those on the public payroll are truly earning their keep, we then demand that our waste be transported well out of sight, smell, or sound—without adding to (or being recognized as a participant in) the daily traffic snafu—and delivered to a magically permitted place nobody wants around.

All this, of course, must be accomplished on a budget that, instead of growing apace with all other services, is actually shrinking so far as most other governmental activities are concerned. And just in case your bile ducts are still functioning, consider that all too often the budget squeeze is necessary to accommodate the export of waste management dollars from the local area to feed investors who have grown weary of being lied to about—yet still manage to uphold their belief in—“those huge profits in waste, just ripe for the plucking.” Despite all this, the American public is darn well served by its waste-service providers who labor in anonymity and whom one rarely sees hauled before the bar of justice for malfeasant activities.

Well served though the public may be, from a materials-management position, not only are we not keeping pace with the challenge, we’re not even playing a game of catch-up. So large is the disparity between our consumption of resources and the level of effort put forth to deal with the results of the orgy, it’s almost too frightening to consider the consequences. And if things were not scary enough, our headlong rush into globalization brings us head to head with the specter of several billions of people scrambling to crash the Western world’s party at the helm of their very own SUVs. Given the insult that a small fraction of the Earth’s inhabitants has cast in the teeth of sustainability, the material feeding frenzy on which we now seem poised to embark is more terrifying than I care to imagine.

## **Looking to Middle Ground**

If some microscopic virus from Timbuktu decides to ride piggy-back in a camel herder’s cell phone and winds up destroying the neural strands of the world’s communications networks, there’s not much you and

I can do about it except to watch while much of what makes our First World possible takes a gigantic dump. That said, I think that to the extent that we can influence foreseeable events, we have the obligation to do so.

The public—even what passes as public opinion—is an unwilling and to some extent antagonistic player in this drama. There are so many competing philosophies and conventional wisdoms floating around, we are hard-pressed to say for certain what is or isn't so. "Global warming's gonna get us" or "Global warming makes the plants grow" or "It's a bunch of bull" or "It's too late to do anything about it." Listen to any group of people, and you'll know how far from consensus we are on nearly every issue that begs a policy response. Worse still, we offer precious little incentive to our elected officials for them to practice stewardship...not that we hold great expectation that those we choose to act in our behalf will rise to the challenge. Even for those among us who voice sincere concern for The Environment, the hope that somehow things will turn out OK biases our most critical decisions in favor of a full stomach and a little something in the bank. And Lord knows, I've no mind to see how miserably I can live any more than I think you can take a measurable bite out of the velocity with which the global economy is growing. This suggests two things to me: (1) the issues are too broad and public interests are too divided to expect a popular demand for change, and (2) recent behavior and expectations to the contrary, our elected officials are the only ones in a position to do something.

"Well, kiss that one off," you say. "No politician is going to stick his or her neck out, particularly when we're in the midst of the greatest economic boom in recent history." How about us in waste management? Can we say that we're any different? Yet we have to have noticed that of all the people we know, we're probably in the best position to influence events. If not we, who?

If you visualize the materials-management process as a continuum that runs from extraction through utilization and eventually to some sort of final disposition—whether this be as waste or transformation—you might consider where opportunity for change is the greatest. The extraction side is so institutionalized and its foundations so firmly set that change does not appear to be an option...even if the public believed that the front end of system was really in need of change. It's the other end of the system—our end—where the need for change is not only readily apparent, but also possible.

### **An Eye Toward the Future: Selling Stewardship**

As you look around the solid waste field, you ought to be impressed with how much is happening. Most visible to the public is the amount of consolidation that has taken place over the past several years, and it shows every sign of continuing well into the 21st century. In our *Elements 1999* issue, we commented on how—despite concerns—we were hard-pressed to find any dire consequences. This year is different, as you undoubtedly know, and Peter Anderson chronicles these changes in his article, "Endgame" (page 24). The mega waste-management companies have faced stiff challenges this past year, and it is not at all obvious that the transition to a new century will make things better. Concerns over financial responsibility for landfill closure and long-term care (see "Dump Now, Pay Later," page 91) might place added strains on some public and private landfills, and it's hard to see where greatly increased profits to satisfy investor demands will come from.

For many jurisdictions, 2000 is a year of reckoning, when their waste diversion performance will be laid bare. Not all will have met their goals, but is this surprising? Should it be a cause for concern? We think not. In fact, when you consider where we were just a decade ago, the growth in both public awareness and infrastructure to divert waste away from premature disposal is truly impressive...a tribute to both public and private initiative. Where to next? Perhaps it's now time to broaden our horizons and look for new and more effective ways to avoid incomplete solutions. One has only to look at such programs as EPA's Life Cycle Assessment Program (page 18) and the SWANA-led bioreactor landfill initiatives to see that creativity and innovation are alive and well in waste management.

At this waypoint on a flight plan whose destination is at best uncertain, we might begin to worry about the flight crew and who's got the stick and throttle. As we slip into the year 2000. I'm not sure that we're in a position to throw our hyperbolic airplane into a screaming 9-g reversal or whap afterburner and engage the wastemakers in a series of vertical rolling scissors maneuvers, but at least we seem to have gotten off the autopilot and nudged the rudder a little. A good start for exciting times.