



The Role of Government*

Activity M.i

GRADE LEVELS: 7 - 8

OBJECTIVES:

The students will be able to:

- List different things the government might do that would affect the solid waste management problem.
- Write a letter to a government official regarding his/her suggested solutions to the solid waste problem.

MATERIALS: Letter-writing materials

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell the students, "There are different ways teachers try to get their students to do certain things. For example, if I wanted you to write the date on your papers, what might I do to get you to do that?"

Response: "Make a rule."

Comment: "Making rules or regulations is one way to get people to do things."

Response: "Give extra credit if you write the date." or "Take off points if you don't write the date."

Comment: "When a teacher does that, it is called an incentive."

2. Have students give other examples either at home or school of rules and incentives.

3. "Just as adults at home and teachers at school try to get you to do certain things, the government also tries to get people, like you and me, to do particular things. One of the things the government has been trying to do is to get people to limit the amount of solid waste they generate. Whether you live in the city, the suburbs, or the country, communities everywhere have the problem of what to do with solid waste. City government, state government, and now even the federal government are trying to deal with this problem. Our local, state, and federal elected officials are constantly hearing from a variety of people who each have their own ideas about what should and should not be done. If you were to write to your government officials today, what suggestions would you give to help solve the solid waste problem?"

4. The suggestions should be written on the board. Once they are listed, the teacher should help the students to group them into the following three categories:

1. government setting regulations
2. government providing incentives
3. a combination of both

5. A discussion of each category should follow. The following information might be included in the

discussion:

Government Setting Regulations – In more than nine states there are laws requiring or encouraging curbside source separation and recycling programs. Under these programs, aluminum, glass, plastics, and newspapers are separated at the curb and taken to recycling centers. An advantage to this is that it reduces the amount of waste that goes into the landfill and it provides a supply of material for recycling operations. A disadvantage is that it is sometimes hard to enforce. Tax dollars that are used to monitor this program could be used in another way to benefit the citizens. The programs that have been the most successful are the ones that have provided collection containers for homeowners to use.

Some towns, states, and the federal government have also passed (or are trying to pass) legislation that would restrict or ban the sale of certain products or materials. For example, 24 states now have laws that require degradable six-pack ring carriers. But by 1992, a federal law will become effective that requires that all six-pack ring carriers are degradable.

Government Providing Incentives – Instead of passing laws to change people's behavior, the government often uses taxes to encourage people to use more efficient packaging and to recycle. For example, the state of Florida has enacted legislation imposing a one- to two-cent disposal fee on aluminum, glass, paper, or plastic containers of five ounces or more if a 50% recycling rate for these containers is not achieved by October 1, 1992.

In several other states, legislation was introduced that would impose sales and use taxes on non-degradable and non-recyclable packaging materials. The advantage of this legislation is that businesses will look for more efficient ways to package their products. A disadvantage is that under our free market economy, the tax will just be passed on to the consumer. Often the burden of these taxes falls harder on lower income consumers than higher income consumers. In addition, often little thought is given to the environmental impact of the replacement product.

A Combination of Both – Some states have combined laws and incentives to accomplish their goal of limiting the amount of garbage generated. Nine states have passed laws that require a deposit of a nickel or more on each soft drink and malt beverage container bought by consumers. To get their money back, consumers must return the empty containers. Returned containers are then sorted and recycled. However, beverage containers represent less than 6% of the solid waste stream.

For example, Washington state fines people who litter and encourages voluntary recycling at the state's estimated 1,000 recycling locations.

6. Once the possibilities of government action have been discussed, students should identify what their local or state government could be doing, but is not, and write to one of their elected officials and express their views of what could be done to help solve the problem of solid waste management.

RELATED ACTIVITIES:

1. Cut out newspaper articles.
2. Invite government officials to visit the classroom to speak on solid waste management.