

Getting a Little Closer with Each Step

Mike McDonald - May 15, 2009

Last in a four-part series on waste management in Costa Rica

Costa Rica has tried several times to create a method for regulating the management of hazardous wastes. Each attempt is a bit more specific and gets the country a little bit closer, but no attempt has been particularly successful.

In 1973, the Legislative Assembly passed the "General Health Law," proposed by the Health Ministry and designed to reduce all kinds of waste, including hazardous materials. In 1995, the then-Ministry of Environment and Energy (MINAE) successfully pushed through the assembly a bill aimed specifically at reducing dangerous and toxic waste.

MINAE went to work again in 1998, promulgating the "Regulation for Dangerous Industrial Waste," an executive decree that promised to "obligate the classification of dangerous waste" and "establish the responsibility of the generator for the treatment and final disposal" of hazardous waste.

Still, Costa Rica is unable to manage the amount of hazardous waste it produces. No data exists to quantify the country's annual hazardous waste production.

However, Jorge Vieta, manager of Geocycle, a company that treats hazardous waste, figures it to be more than 100,000 tons per year. This is waste that includes car oil, batteries and chemical solvents. His plant can treat about 24,000 tons yearly, and it is one of only a few options in the country for companies looking to properly dispose of hazardous waste.

"It's not an attractive investment," Vieta said of the lack of treatment facilities in the country. "No one enforces the management of hazardous waste, so no one wants to build companies that treat it."

Geocycle is not the only hazardous waste treatment plant in Costa Rica, but it appears to be the most comprehensive. The company's plant can dispose of just about any dangerous chemical - from batteries to agrochemicals - by incinerating the waste in concrete kilns at temperatures as high as 2,000 degrees Celsius (3,632 Fahrenheit).

This year, officials are trying yet again to pass a law that would regulate the disposal of hazardous waste and promote the creation of treatment plants.

The Integrated Waste Management Bill (GIR), which is being debated in the Legislative Assembly, would require companies that produce hazardous waste to sign contracts with treatment facilities, such as Geocycle, in order to dispose of their products' harmful leftovers in an appropriate way. Also, any company that discards destructive chemicals would be punished if the bill becomes law.

Sandra Spies, director of Costa Rica GTZ, the German cooperation agency that is overseeing Costa Rica's new recycling plan, said the problem with previous laws was a lack of oversight.

"It's 90 percent paperwork, but the number of people who go out and (enforce) the plans is 10 percent," she said.

Since previous plans failed, officials have organized members from the Institute for Municipal Development (IFAM), the Healthy Ministry, and the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET) to enforce the proposed law. This is the first time such a coalition has been organized to address hazardous waste issues, and officials are optimistic that it will facilitate stronger supervision.

Spies said the dearth of outlets where companies can discard hazardous waste leads to unsafe disposal practices. Burning used oil has become popular, but Spies said this is "the worst thing you can do," as setting fire to hazardous chemicals releases extremely dangerous toxins into the air.

Rolando Castro, an attorney with the Environmental and Natural Resources Law Center (CEDARENA), who helped draft the bill, said motor oil was once used in bakery ovens until bakers realized that the oil could contaminate the food.

Now, most of Costa Rica's motor oil is collected by service stations and then picked up by Geocycle, but still not in the quantity that the country's consumption of oil demands.

Castro said the mandates of the proposed law, combined with punishments for violations, will force companies to find treatment solutions. The demand for more treatment services would spur investment by more companies in Costa Rica's hazardous waste treatment infrastructure.

"I think this proposed law is better than ones before," Castro said. "The idea is to force the generator of the waste to be responsible for it."

Castro said it would force producers to work with disposers and also make them liable, insuring that the treatment plant is safely eliminating harmful materials.

“Companies would have to prove that the treatment plants they have a contract with are correctly treating the chemicals,” he said.

While Vieto said he thinks the plan offers some positive opportunities for businesses to grow and improve the national hazardous waste plan, he says the law doesn’t go far enough to eliminate the production of dangerous chemicals in the first place.

“I believe the plan opens some doors, but I think its missing the idea of reduction in dangerous chemicals,” he said. “The solution is pollution prevention, not pollution treatment.”

The Tico Times is Central America's Leading English-Language Newspaper, covering news, business, tourism and cultural developments in Costa Rica and Central America. The award-winning weekly has been reporting on the region from San Jose, Costa Rica, since 1971 and became a member of the Inter-American Press Association in 1989. TT's Online Edition provides a brief capsule of stories appearing every Friday in our PRINT EDITION. And in response to reader demands, we now offer a complete DATABASE of back issues and online CLASSIFIEDS.

Call us at 258-1558 inside Costa Rica or from the U.S. 011 (506) 258-1558 or fax us at 233-6378 inside Costa Rica or from the U.S. 011 (506) 233-6378, email: info@ticotimes.net