

EPA Region 2 Back-to-School Waste Reduction Podcast

John- Welcome to EPA Region 2 podcast. I'm John Senn and I work in the Region's Public Affairs Division. Last time, we talked about how you can save energy and money during the summertime while using Energy Star appliances and products and simple, commonsense sustainability methods. And now that summers starting to wind down, lots of people are thinking about the back to school season, and today were going to talk about how you can minimize waste as you get your kids back to the classroom. Today I'm joined by Melissa Dimas, who is an analyst who has a background in sustainability, who also works in the Public Affairs Division. Welcome Melissa.

Melissa- Thanks John. Hi, how are you doing? Yeah, we're talking today about the three R's, which is really reduce, reuse and recycle. You know everyone, I think, is familiar with recycling cause that's one thing we all try and do, but really environmentally speaking it's better to take an inventory of what you have and really reduce first, which is thinking about a product before you buy anything. Do you really need it? How did the production of this product impact the environment and what further impacts would there be with the disposal of the product? Then you can also look at reusing. The media does a wonderful job with selling the attractiveness and benefits of buying new and improved products, but you know, do we really need this or stuff already in our closets or in our drawers that we can reuse? And then obviously, recycling. A lot of our products...you think that because something is plastic that you can actually recycle it but you know that there are numbers at the bottom that will correspond to as whether or not they can be recycled. Today were going to talk about a lot of these different ways to reduce, reuse and recycle for this new school year. So maybe we can start with shopping?

John- Sure that sounds good. And you mentioned before you go back to school shopping to take kind of an inventory of the things you already have, look for things you don't need to buy new again every year—backpacks, things like refillable pens you can use year after year. Something like Patagonia...they make very sturdy backpacks out of recycled bottles, so that's something that would last for a long time, and also is recycling something from the waste stream which hits on two of those R's that you mentioned before...binders that you can use every year and refill instead of getting the traditional spiral bound notebooks.

Melissa- Yeah I remember throwing those out each year...

John- Absolutely and I feel like you don't use half the sheets in those notebooks and they just kind of go in the recycling bin either way. And clothing is a big back to school item, too, and you know that's definitely somewhere

where you could kind of help out there and I guess reuse and kind of not necessarily kind of get new stuff every year.

Melissa- Right. Well actually organic cotton is something that you could definitely look for. You know 25 percent of the world's pesticides are used on cotton products, so it's really important for you to look for organic cotton. Also a lot of the fertilizers that are in pesticides that are used contain nitrogen. Nitrogen is actually 270 times more efficient in trapping heat than carbon dioxide and it lasts 150 years in the atmosphere, which says a lot when we were talking about climate change and global warming. One place you could go to look for organic cotton is organiccottondirectory.net. That's www.organiccottondirectory.net and that will give you a list of all sorts of products and companies where you could buy online or you can go to their actual store, but it will say you know what kind of products they're using and if they're using certified organic cotton.

John- I was also surprised to see, well maybe not that surprised but Wal-Mart on their website says that they use 10 million pounds of organic cotton. And they claim to be the world's largest buyer of organic cotton and estimate that that trade is worth 80 million dollars every year at least for Wal-Mart. That's a pretty staggering amount.

Melissa- Yeah I didn't know that. Yeah when you are going shopping also don't forget to bring your own bag that's one thing. I always put it in my purse but you know if you could bring some bags with you when you're out shopping. For a lot of people that are going back to college, a lot of times they're going to be buying new furniture...you can look online to see if...like Ikea. Both Ikea and Target have some environmentally preferred products with less formaldehyde, but make sure you check the labels cause sometimes just because the company has environmental products doesn't necessarily mean what you're buying is environmental, so you need to make sure you ask and also check the labels.

John- And there's also the alternative of going down to the thrift store to see what they have there for furniture, which is probably going to be cheaper. You know you could probably find some good deals down there. Same with clothing. Thrift shops are in, definitely...vintage clothing and all that kind of stuff. And you can definitely save some money and get some pretty good stuff that way.

Melissa- That's true, you know actually some colleges are starting something called a college swap, where at the end of the year, a bunch of people go around and get...I remember for in college at the end of the year when people were moving out people would just throw furniture on the sidewalk, and these colleges are actually getting a bunch of kids together and collecting all this furniture and then selling to the incoming freshman or other

people—upper classman at the beginning of the school year, so you can also look for that at your college. Look for the used furniture. It's a cheap easy way to get stuff and actually reuse, which brings us to our next topic of books. Obviously going back to school, there's a lot of money that's being spent on college books and also in high school and elementary school, you're going to be covering your books.

John- Yeah, absolutely. I think most folks have to cover their books when they're younger students, and I think grocery bags is a great way to do that. I think it's something that is sturdy I remember I use to do that all the time and it really worked.

Melissa- And you get to decorate your books, your covers that way too.

John- Absolutely...and then for college text books, you know, the alternative to going to the bookstore and buying new and very expensive books are kind of online trading sites where you can buy used books for much cheaper prices than you would find at the bookstore. All of the major book sellers, retailers have those types of sites set up, where you can buy from other people who have just had those books, so it's just another way to just reuse.

Melissa- Half.com and Amazon.com and eBay, right? They all have places where you can get...so you'd be surprised what you can find. You think your book might be very obscure and you'll never find it but you can save a lot of money.

John- It's definitely out there, especially for law school text books, which are very expensive.

Melissa- But, you know, we all need to eat when we're at school and so another way to reduce is actually packing a waste free lunch. The average child eating a disposable lunch—which means using plastic bags and throw away napkins and utensils—throws about 67 pounds of waste each year and a school of 500 kids could throw away 33,500 pounds of trash per year. So switching to a waste free lunch, which is using reusable containers, stainless utensils and cloth napkins makes a big difference on the amount of waste that we're throwing away, and studies show actually that it also can save up to \$250 a year and that's only for a nine month school year, which with the summer included it could be about \$300. You know we all think "oh \$300," but that is a lot of money especially when you only have more than one child in your house. So reducing, bringing your own lunch bag or box—and there's actually something called the laptop lunch box—so you can go to...there's a great website that has tons of tips that on how to do waste free lunches with menus and all sorts of stuff. It's called wastefreelunches.org and they have everything from trash

audits, which is a great way to get the school involved, reducing waste of the entire school—you can actually have a competition between classes of you know how much your producing one week where you're bringing in your disposable lunch and then compete to see who can reduce the amount of waste by bring in the waste free lunch.

John- Yeah you talk about waste at lunch time and most of us don't really think of it because were such a kind of disposable culture and kind of a fast paced culture where we want everything kind of on the move, but you think about some of the stuff we eat, especially stuff that goes in kids lunches and it's individually wrapped cheese and individually wrapped servings of fruit and things like that. And that generates so much plastic that just doesn't need to be there if we kind of take small steps to be there to reduce packaging, which if you think about packaging in general for all the things that we buy, packaging accounts for a huge percentage of the weight of something that you purchase...everything from a pen to a toothbrush, to a lot of the food that we buy, so it's definitely very important to look for food that comes in bulk or even homemade sandwiches, things like that...whole pieces of fruit and that's likely to be healthier too since you have more control over the ingredients and what goes into a homemade sandwich or a homemade snack or a baked treat or something like that.

Melissa- Yeah definitely...those little applesauce packages and pudding and yogurt, I mean it all adds up and you can actually buy little Tupperware containers and it might take about 30 seconds more to fill the Tupperware up, but it's not only reducing, your saving money as well. And there's also local food programs where you can look to see—one thing a lot of us we don't necessarily realize when we're buying our food at the grocery store is that it's coming from 300 miles away or even more than that—thousands. So if you're in New York and you're buying fruits from California...that's a lot of carbon being emitted just by transportation.

John- I read somewhere the other day that even though New York is such a great state for producing apples that most of the apples, the vast majority of the apples we eat here in New York, come from California. So just to think about how it gets from the orchard in California to your table in New York—that's a long distance to cover and it's got to get there some how.

Melissa- Well you know in a lot of schools, not in a lot of schools excuse me, there's actually a movement in New York to look at putting greenhouses on the roofs of many buildings and that's one way a school can get involved in producing their own food just locally and its also a good way for the kids to understand their connection to nature and the need to have fresh fruits and vegetables not coming from so far away...but I think that schools are trying to engage local farmers as well and that's one

way...you can talk to the PTA. Maybe its something that the PTA could do to get involved with making sure were not getting—making sure the food is healthy and its coming from closer....

John- Absolutely, I know that restaurants here in New York are starting to buy from the farmers at the New York City farmers market every weekend and a lot of the restaurants kind of tout that on their menus to try to be more sustainable and, by all means, that something that schools can do too. I know that at the University of Montana, there's a farm to college program where a certain percentage or a certain expenditure of the university's food budget comes or goes to buying crops and buying meat from local farmers, so that it doesn't have to travel those thousands or those hundreds of food miles, as we call them. And then you know the farmer, you're likely to be able to go to the farm and see their operations. You can be choosy...if you want someone that's totally organic but most likely you have that option for someone that's hopefully within your state or not too far away.

Melissa- Yeah it's a good way to get involved also. At the end of the day we're all using computers and lots of paper to do our homework on so maybe we can move on and talk about the ways that we can save some energy and reuse, reduce with the computers. Definitely we all, hopefully, have heard of Energy Star...if not there's a great program the EPA and the Department of Energy have developed a product label that's called Energy Star and it's certified that's it's actually reducing the energy of the product, so look for that label when you're buying an air conditioner or when you're buying for that room in college or you're buying a new computer—there are all sorts of appliances. I think that in the first podcast, which you guys can check out, you talked a lot about this.

John- Yeah, there are hundred of computers out there...computers and accessories and peripherals that have gotten their Energy Star certification so they definitely use at least 10 percent, I believe, less energy then conventional appliances and products.

Melissa- And actually the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority is actually giving rebates if you bring in your old.... if you are going to buy a new air conditioner for school and you have an old one you use last year that's not Energy Star, they'll actually pay between \$35 and \$100 for your new air conditioner and give you money for your old one.

John- And you can find that out on their website right?

Melissa- Yeah Nyserda.org

John- Can you spell that out?

- Melissa- Nyserda.org. That should be where you can find...there are a lot of great tips there too.
- John- And in terms of just recycling paper too...lots of students now are doing assignments on computers. It's pretty mandatory and a regular practice in a lot of places, so it's really important to recycle that printer paper as much as possible and when you're buying printer paper to buy post-consumer recycled paper, which means taking paper that's already in the waste stream and recycling it to help make this new product. I read that for every ton of paper that's recycled, 380 gallons of gas and 7,000 gallons of water are saved, so that's a staggering amount...as well as enough electricity to power a house for six months. So people think that the small amount that you recycle of anything is not making that big of a difference but people, especially students writing longer papers, you're going to go through a lot of paper in a school year and if you and 10 friends recycle all your paper that's going to really save a lot of energy.
- Melissa- And reduce the amount of gas that's emitted. Well also we hope that everyone now is printing double sided and making sure that all their paper, even if it's just for notes. If you do—what I think is a great idea is grabbing paper from the recycling bin that's only one side used and actually stapling them all together and using the other side as sort of a scrap notepad that you can write things down and that's a really good way to reuse the stuff and then when your done with that then you could go ahead and recycle it again, so it's kind of like you got a double recycling going on there.
- John- Yup or even using a the draft mode on your printer which is easy to find and it uses a lot less ink, and then, eventually when the printer cartridge runs out, lots of stores now will give you a rebate if you bring in the spent printer cartridge instead of just throwing it away. I think its like three dollars at Staples and I know lots of other places do it too.
- Melissa- Which is funny because printers aren't that expensive but it's the ink cartridges that really add up, so as long as you can drag that ink out as long as possible and then go back in and get the rebate.
- John- And then in certain cases, I know in some schools you can just email in your assignments to your teachers and that eliminates the paper trail altogether.
- Melissa- Well another thing is all of the home electronics that we have and besides the Energy Star label, looking for the Energy Star label, you can also try to find some rechargeable batteries. There are a lot of different kinds of rechargeable batteries out there but definitely something....one regular

battery...excuse me one rechargeable battery is the same amount as 500 regular batteries, so you're really saving a lot and reducing a lot of the waste that's going into the waste stream. You're also reusing and recycling these...we hope that everyone is recycling there non-rechargeable batteries because they shouldn't be going into the waste stream but there's also particular battery rechargers that will recharge alkaline batteries, which is great that's something I didn't know about. You can also look for solar power batteries.

John- Well in all of the major batteries manufacturers make rechargeable batteries as well and I mean if you just think about 500 batteries and just pile that up...that's a lot of batteries, that's a lot of weight. And at the same time, think about how much 500 batteries cost you. I mean they're expensive and that's a very tangible cost savings over not that short of time, cause batteries run out pretty quick especially with new devices that need more power than in the past.

Melissa- Well actually I bought rechargeable batteries the other day and they came with a charger and it came with four AA's and four AAA's and the little pack to recharge them in and I think it was \$40. So just that alone I think for an eight pack of batteries—it's usually about \$15 so just thinking about that it's a pretty good deal.

John- Another kind of similar opportunity to save money and energy is with compact fluorescent light bulbs, when you're lighting, your study area, your desk, your dorm room that kind of thing. And again compact fluorescent light bulbs, CFL's as their known, they use lots of less energy as conventional bulbs and they last much longer and they produce energy from light instead of heat which is where 90 percent of energy in regular light bulbs goes. It goes to heat not light.

Melissa- Yeah actually make sure when you do buy these that you know you can't throw them in the trash...they need to be recycled. They use 2/3 less energy than the conventional light bulb and they last I think five years. So they'll last you through college, which is great as long as you're making it through...but yeah there are a lot of programs EPA has...one is a great program we have for buses...it's the low-sulfur diesel buses—it's a program in New York and New Jersey and there's actually been a study, right John, that EPA has put out. I don't remember the exact....

John- It basically talked about how buses that are turned on and off and reduce idling time significantly lower the amount of pollution that goes into the air so for bus drivers and for parents out there it's a great kind of advocacy tool, this report, to show that reducing idling time—basically the time when a bus is stopped, not moving, waiting for kids to get on and off. Turn

the buses on and off and it saves a lot of pollution. And we have a website that discusses that report and kind of talks more about our program. Its epa.gov/cleanschoolbus, all one word, and it's got a lot of great information on there. Also that kinds of goes into the health issue a little bit concerning schools and that's something that people might not initially think of when they think about the school their kids are attending because you'd like to think that the school is healthy and that everything up to grade there, but you know, indoor air quality, pesticides, those types of things can be an issue at some schools...and again epa.gov/schools has some great tools on there for parents and teachers. It also has good local information for folks in this area—New York and New Jersey and it's another great resource for people to kind of figure out what the levels should be at their schools and kind of how to act and make sure that your school is healthy.

Melissa- I agree you know you could actually look for green cleaning products too. You know, a lot the products we use, they have a lot of volatile organic compounds, which can actually induce asthma in small children so you can reduce that by using green cleaning products and there are a lot different kinds out there...just one that comes off the top of my head is Seven Generation products—they're made from a natural based...no chemicals and they do a good job. So that's something where parents and teachers can advocate through the PTA or that the managers of the school that are cleaning—it's not only healthy for the children but it's healthy for those who actually cleaning the school. So the PTA....I think some PTA's have environmental committees, right John?

John- I think they do and again you can check online to see what your local and state PTA's are up to. The website for the one in New Jersey is NJPTA.org...for New York its NYSPTA.org, and I know that the New Jersey Education Association has a section on its website about health and safety and school and they are at NJEA.org.

Melissa- Yeah there just are a plethora of things that schools can do to reduce, reuse and recycle. I think a lot of schools have actually taken to composting, which is very easy as well. I believe there's some green events that schools are hosting as well.

John- Yeah kids and teachers can take this in whatever direction they want to. I read the other day how last year some kids in Pittsburg wanted to make an environmental statement, an impact with their prom. I guess it was about a dozen or so students took the bus to their prom in their tuxedos and their prom dresses, so that was an interesting statement about how they can reduce their environmental impact even at something like the prom.

- Melissa- Yeah I agree. I think this is a great time to be really thinking about the future generation when we're talking about back to school. It's our kids, it's your kids...everyone should try to do something to reduce their impact.
- John- Absolutely, I think that if people have a good idea, and if kids have a good idea, especially to improve their school they should just do it. Getting involved is the best and most effective way to get something done...if you think it's a great idea, kids tell your parents about it, tell your teachers about it, tell the principle about it, tell your friends about it and get them involved and make sure your out there and making an effort to get stuff done. For parents try to incorporate these practices with your kids every day—set up recycling at home if you can and talk to their teachers if you have some of these ideas you want to share with them to really make a difference in the classroom.
- Melissa- Yeah I hope it's a successful year for all these...the three R's in the New York, New Jersey, Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands area.
- John- And also the seven tribal nations that are here in EPA Region 2. I think we're about to wrap it up today, so I want to thank Melissa Dimas for being here with us. And again, just to try to summarize, it's the back to school season, people are thinking a lot about what they can buy what they need to get to get their kids ready, but, environmentally speaking, we talk about waste reduction, reuse and recycling but the back to school time is really an opportunity to focus on reducing the amount of waste that you create. Reusing materials that you should take a look at that might have in your home anyway and then eventually recycling things that are waste products of what you buy. I hope people have enjoyed this broadcast for today and please visit us online at epa.gov/region2.