

Iowa Counties: Saying YES to EMS

By: Beverly Rivera Davis

Metro Waste Authority

Question of the Decade: Do your solid waste facility managers want to tailor their environmental programs to the specific needs of your community, garner state grant funding and free consulting services, improve outcomes, cut costs and even receive exemptions from some state regulations?

If so, then the Environmental Management System (EMS) is the next step toward greater sustainability, operational efficiency and cost-savings. By signing onto EMS, your landfill managers will be joining the ranks of other counties – from Polk and Linn to Clay and Cass – that have chalked-up proven results after three years of trailblazing Iowa’s unique EMS program.

What Exactly is EMS?

“Iowa’s EMS is a voluntary management program for solid waste planning areas. Some participants use computer software specifically designed to track and measure environmental program results and compliance. EMS encourages responsible environmental management while prompting good stewardship and continuous improvements,” says Brian Tormey, Land Bureau Chief for the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Tormey, along with a representative committee of solid waste managers, spearheaded the introduction of EMS; a groundbreaking piece of legislation offered as an alternative to the state’s Comprehensive Planning that controls solid waste planning areas and permitted facilities. Iowa is the first state in the nation with an EMS voluntary law – HF 2570 – unanimously passed by the Iowa Legislature in 2008.

Why EMS?

There’s a simple reason EMS appeared on the radar screens of solid waste managers, the DNR, and state legislators: Comprehensive Planning, first adopted in the early 1990s, was starting to show its age.

Beyond environmental compliance regulations, Comprehensive Planning was largely based on the annual 25% landfill diversion reduction requirement for each solid waste agency area and many agencies weren’t getting credit for all the good environmental work they were doing, often unfair to many of the smaller, more rural agencies.

Sara Bixby, South Central Solid Waste Agency’s Director, serving Lucas, Marion, Monroe and Poweshiek Counties, explained the limitations of Comprehensive Planning.

“EMS is a chance for us to take the next step. We’ve complained about Comprehensive Planning for 20 years now. It didn’t meet some of our needs for actually making positive environmental improvements that didn’t directly relate to diverting the amount of waste that goes into the landfill.”

EMS: Single Hits vs Home Runs

With EMS, solid waste agencies opt out of the Comprehensive Planning program and even some state regulations by developing, implementing and receiving credit for all of their environmental programs, specifically related to six areas of focus that are measured and tracked with EMS software:

- Yard waste management
- Household hazardous waste collection
- Water quality improvement
- Greenhouse gas reduction
- Recycling services
- Environmental education

The key to a successful EMS program is continuous improvement and measuring results. Starting out by focusing on small, but continuous improvements is where it’s at, according to Laura Fiffick, DNR’s pilot consultant for the EMS program.

“EMS is not about hitting home runs, it’s about going for the single hits every day that over the long haul add up to big results,” says Tom Hadden, Executive Director of Metro Waste Authority.

EMS in Action

From Metro Waste Authority’s steel and glass downtown Des Moines headquarters, Hadden manages the state’s largest solid waste facility and experienced firsthand the benefits of EMS. As one of the six original EMS pilots, he’s a stalwart supporter of the new program now being offered to all Iowa counties by DNR.

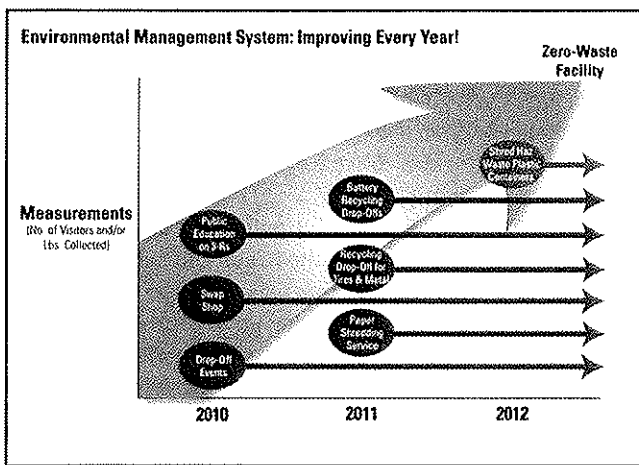
“The best way to explain EMS is by actually showing how we added programs to our Metro Hazardous Waste Drop-Off with the ultimate goal of creating a Zero-Waste facility,” said Hadden

According to Hadden, several years ago their Metro Hazardous Waste Drop-Off (MHWD) was still receiving high amounts of material they couldn’t recycle or reuse resulting in more waste being incinerated.

Through EMS, the Metro Waste Authority team began making small, but continuous – and measurable – improvements

at the MHWD. Their activities included:

1. Public education on 3-Rs (Reduce, Recycle and Reuse)
2. Swap shop (Reuse)
3. Drop-off events
4. Battery recycling drop-offs
5. Recycling drop-off for tires and metal
6. Paper shredding service
7. Shredded hazardous waste plastic containers



EMS Results

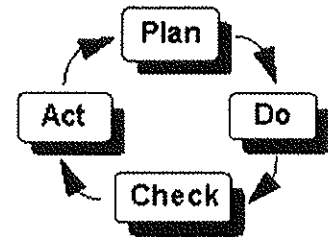
“Over three years of EMS, what resulted was a 78% increased use of our Metro Hazardous Waste Drop-Off facility as we continue working toward and nearly attaining a ZERO WASTE facility. We know what the results are because with EMS’s software program, every project is measured by quantifiable results,” says Hadden.

Hadden is one of the many solid waste county managers who have started and measured new environmental programs that range from Scott County’s certified E-Waste de-manufacturing facility that reduces electronic waste to Clay County’s Wood Chipper loan-out program that reduces open burning and improves air quality. The creativity is limitless based on a community’s priorities and needs.

EMS Bennies

The benefits of starting and maintaining an EMS program go far beyond receiving state grant funding, webinars, free on-site consultants and management software. “After implementing EMS, the participants documented multiple benefits including improved employee morale, cost effectiveness and operational efficiencies, so EMS went well beyond just environmental compliance,” says EMS consultant Fiffick.

Starting an EMS program includes the plan, do, check, and act cycle (graphic inserted) and Fiffick recommends starting small because the metrics can be challenging when first setting up the program. However, Wendy Wittrock, Environmental Control Director for Cass County says, “The first year can be overwhelming, but now that we’re in our third year, EMS has proven to be a far better environmental management system for our community, where we are now getting credit for all the good environmental improvements that we are making. We now know what works based on the numbers.”



Kick-Starting EMS Program

Laura Fiffick outlined the elements included in an EMS phase I start-up, which includes a \$20,000 quick grant (new applicant grant funding due on August 1.)

- Gap analysis
- Fenceline (scope of EMS)
- Team selection
- Environmental policy statement
- Environmental impacts
- Legal and other requirements
- Objectives and targets
- Action plan
- Identifying key resources and additional needs
- Communication/training/awareness
- Monitoring and measurement
- Assessment
- Reevaluation and modification

“Starting small is really the way to go, but you can’t shortchange the metrics, probably one of the biggest pains of the system, but that’s how you know you are doing better,” says Fiffick.

EMS is the new IT word for Iowa counties looking to improve their bottom line and leave a lasting environmental legacy for generations to come.

For more information on EMS, contact, Leslie Goldsmith at 515.281.8499 or Leslie.Goldsmith@dnr.iowa.gov or check out DNR’s website on EMS:

<http://www.iowadnr.gov/InsiderDNR/RegulatoryLand/SolidWaste/ComprehensivePlanning/SolidWasteEMS.aspx>.