

“On the Conditions Affecting Successful Sustainable Consumption Programs and Policies”

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These comments were made as an invited discussant to a two-panel series on “European Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption Policy,” led by Lars Mortensen of the European Environmental Agency, and “U.S. Perspectives on Sustainable Consumption Policy,” led by Vicky Salazar, Jeri Weiss, and Katharine Kaplan of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

The two panels provide some insights into the conditions under which sustainable consumption policy can be more or less successful. In Europe environmental policy is driven mostly by initiatives at the EU-level. In some ways the EU initiatives (e.g., the 2001 EU Sustainable Consumption Strategy, the 2008 EU Action Plan, the 2012 Resource Efficiency Roadmap, and the inclusion of sustainable consumption in the 7th Environmental Action Program in 2013) indicate a more advanced or coherent sustainable consumption policy situation than in the U.S. Because the EU still supports the Kyoto process and has an underlying political consensus in support of climate mitigation policy, there is underlying support for sustainable consumption policy initiatives. Furthermore, the EU governance structure is somewhat more insulated from industry than the government in the US, due to the weaker role of pro-industry think tanks and the weaker direct participation of the industry in electoral and media campaigns. Nevertheless, there is significant industry influence through the dominant directorates, and environmental protection agencies in both the EU and the US often face uphill battles with industry over the level, quality, and even necessity of regulations and standards. In the EU there is a heavy emphasis on growth and employment.

In the US trade associations sometimes complain that new standards and regulations will result in job loss because factories will move off-shore. There are significant differences across industry sectors, with the appliance industry most concerned with regulatory interventions and the technology industry (e.g., computers) more flexible and adaptive. In the US the utilities have in some cases played a role of countervailing power to the appliance industry, because some utilities have renewable portfolio standard goals and other state-government policy frameworks that lead them to support energy efficiency and other carbon-reduction policies. Furthermore, in the US the EPA has also found opportunities for policy development by working with state and local governments to encourage them to develop policies, such as zero waste targets and local procurement policies. The highlighting of “zero waste” communities can help to provide models that push communities to modify their waste reduction policies.

We also learn that there are specific approaches to the implementation of policy that can result in greater or lower acceptance by industry. For example, gradual approaches (e.g., a soft curve on the increase in the level of Energy Star standards) has worked better than setting a specific time in the future for a dramatic change in the level of the standards. Also, “top end” programs such as the “most

efficient” Energy Star product help spur the entire industry to compete for innovation. We also learn that it is important to handle the problem of creeping size increases of appliances and homes, so that energy efficiency gains are not lost by gross increases in energy consumption to the scale increases. In the case of televisions, the decision was not to set a limit based on size but instead to set a limit based on absolute energy consumption associated with a model (50-inch) maximum size. If larger units can achieve the same level of energy efficiency, then they can still gain the label.