

2.1 Are We All Speaking the Same Language?

Before we see who benefits from waste reduction and how it happens, we need to define what it means. This guide emphasizes the term “**waste reduction**” defined in EPA’s, **Business Guide for Reducing Solid Waste**, as "all actions taken to reduce the amount and/or toxicity of waste requiring disposal." That includes waste prevention or source reduction, recycling, composting, purchasing, and manufacturing goods having recycled content or that are made with less waste.

This definition has **two distinct concepts**. **First**, we need to think about the materials or energy waste involved in using those resources to produce goods and services. Such wastes include solid and hazardous materials, air emissions, sewer discharges, and energy consumption. **Second**, waste can be reduced by buying products and services made or provided from recycled content materials or that are produced with less waste. This second point does not always directly benefit the purchaser's bottom line, but it can help. For example, purchasing products with less packaging or returnable packaging reduces or eliminates waste for the buyer.

Let’s consider priorities in managing wastes before we try to understand waste reduction terms. The U.S. EPA established a **hierarchy** for waste management that has been adopted in essentially the same form by most states. The Pollution Prevention Act of 1990 set a national policy from Congress that parallels similar priorities for solid waste management. This system emphasizes source reduction at the top of the pyramid and disposal at the bottom as illustrated in Figure A.

POLLUTION PREVENTION HIERARCHY

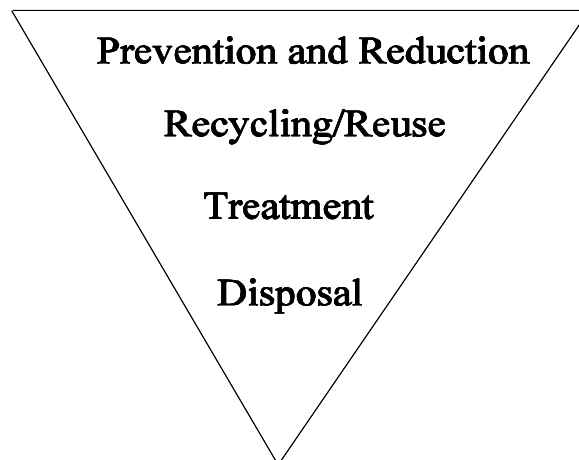


Figure A

The **first priority** is to **reduce waste at the source**, with less material entering the waste stream. This concept has the greatest potential to benefit a business, since it directly saves raw materials costs. It also could reduce disposal, treatment, waste handling costs, and extra cost of liability and disposal of hazardous materials.

The familiar concept of **recycling, along with composting, is a second priority**. A waste is still being generated that must be recycled. It is a better resource management choice to recycle the material than to dispose of it at a landfill. However, the business must still pay at least twice for the recycled material. First, the recycled material is lost raw material that was to be purchased. Then, once it becomes a recyclable waste stream item, there is additional waste handling cost.

Treatment is a third priority related particularly to hazardous wastes. This approach is taken in conjunction with **pollution control technologies**. Incineration, treatment of sewer discharges, and chemical treatments are included. With solid waste, incineration for energy recovery would be at the same priority level.

The **lowest priority is land disposal** of the final waste stream. This is the most expensive way to use natural resources.

Speaking the Right Language

When educators, technical assistance providers, counselors, and regulators communicate with the business community, they must use mutually understood terms and concepts. We take this for granted, but communication failure is common. Technical assistance providers know that waste management terms are often confusing and misunderstood by businesses.

For example, regulated businesses have been subject to an increasingly complex array of environmental laws, regulations, rules, and policies since the 1960s. The first major concept widely championed was “pollution control”. This is an end-of-pipe, post-generation waste treatment strategy. Pollution control meant removing excess pollutants or reducing the toxicity of wastes released to sewers or through smoke stacks. This was followed by a major emphasis on solid waste management and properly designed landfills. Various recycling, source reduction, and composting initiatives followed solid waste management. For more hazardous materials, we heard about “waste minimization” in the 1980s. This gave way to “pollution prevention”. Is it any wonder that businesses are confused?

This is not an attempt define all terms used by the regulatory community and others promoting better material use practices. It is more important to assist the smaller business or manufacturer to understand the most meaningful terms. The business counselor or technical assistance person can provide this help. Large companies often have staff devoted to waste stream reporting, thus they have a better understanding of the laws and terminology.

A recent informal survey of current waste-related terms (Table 2.1) affirms confusion over these words. From a regulatory view, “pollution prevention” and “pollution control” had almost identical responses. This interpretation is contrary to the distinction that pollution prevention is a more voluntary source reduction strategy than pollution control. This survey showed that “waste management” and “recycling” had a significant regulatory image. The least regulatory term was “waste reduction”. This term was more closely aligned with “cost reduction” than any other term

surveyed.

Several state pollution prevention technical assistance providers recognize this problem. They have placed more emphasis on using “waste reduction” as a synonymous concept that helps businesses better understand pollution prevention and the potential benefits. Therefore, **this guidebook will continue to emphasize waste reduction**, recognizing that pollution prevention is included in the concept.

Table 2.1 Speaking the Right Language: Small Business Development Center counselors, county extension agents, state agency representatives, and small business representatives in Wisconsin were surveyed. Responses indicate reactions to current terms to determine if people see them as having either regulatory or economic implications.

Terminology	<i>Regulatory</i>	<i>Neutral</i>	<i>Economic</i>
Cost Reduction	0	2	25
Pollution Control	24	2	11
Recycling	16	6	14
Waste Reduction	11	3	21
Pollution Prevention	21	1	12
Elimination of Waste	14	2	19