

# **BLUE RIDGE ENVIRONMENTAL DEFENSE LEAGUE**

[www.bredl.org](http://www.bredl.org)

## **Zero Waste and Environmental Democracy**

**A Statement by the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League**  
**Zero Waste forces us to examine our shared responsibilities for how we live and to acknowledge the impact of our actions on those who live around us.**

The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League began over twenty years ago with a commitment to earth stewardship, environmental democracy, social justice and community empowerment. Since that first campaign against a high-level nuclear waste dump, we have confronted hazardous waste and medical waste incinerators as well as numerous regional and multi-state solid waste dumps. BREDL chapters worked in their communities to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars and wage long public campaigns to win victories against very powerful corporations. The principles and commitment that we shared in 1984 are reflected in our goals for Zero Waste.

Zero Waste advocates face many difficult choices as they campaign for concepts such as Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), Clean Production and Cradle-to-Cradle ownership of products and waste. The goals of preserving resources and eliminating waste disposal require fundamental shifts in a consumer economy rooted in extraction, consumption, wasting and dumping. Corporate interests who profit from the current economic model control the process and have little incentive to adopt new ways of doing business. Changing consumer behavior in a marketplace contaminated with externalized costs presents an even greater challenge.

A consumption economy depends on constantly finding new places to dispose of waste. Waste companies understand the political process required to identify those communities where leaders can be convinced to take someone else's garbage. Often the same communities that have endured the extraction stage of production are now targeted to get the waste dump. Strip mines in the north and abandoned pine plantations in the south are popular targets. In general, they are rural, poor, minority, and conservative.

This leaves them vulnerable to offers of what we have termed "dumping for dollars". Wealthy cities may not notice the extra dollar per ton that is paid to an unknown rural county where commissioners are anxious about their declining tax base. The mega-dump is easily sold as economic development to county commissioners with an uneducated, often under-employed, workforce, and a few absentee corporate landowners. Waste companies know how to make this pitch. Every county needs a new school.

Recycling, waste reduction, resource recovery parks, and Extended Producer Responsibility are all essential parts of any campaign for Zero Waste. Out of sight-out of

mind landfills are not. Exporting waste to poor communities is not. Encouraging "dumping for dollars" is not.

We acknowledge the power of grassroots campaigns to create the conditions necessary for change. We support a Zero Waste movement that recognizes both the threats to landfill and incinerator communities and the opportunities to include those communities in the larger efforts essential for success. Our original principles and demands for environmental democracy still apply today.