

“As a result of overflowing a container, oil was released into the river. Cleaning up the pollution will cost thousands of pounds.”

All activities produce some waste, and dealing responsibly with your waste is part of good business practice. There is also a legal requirement to do this and an increasing demand from environmentally conscious consumers.

If you produce hazardous waste, you need to take special care when handling, storing and disposing of it. Authorities that grant permits and licences set specific conditions or limits for releases and emissions. If you need to dispose of special waste, asbestos for example, you must use the services of a licensed waste disposer and it must be correctly labelled.

Badly handled chemicals, effluent, oil or fuel can cause harmful releases into the ground, watercourses or the air. Storing and handling chemicals in a way that’s against the law increases this risk. Noise, light and emissions of dust, fumes and smoke can also pollute the environment.

Businesses that cause environmental damage are liable to pay for the clean up costs as well as possible fines (‘the polluter pays’ principle).

Environmental risks can cause damage over a long period of time. A disused refuse dump, for example, can contaminate the ground around it for many years. Environmental risks can also emerge suddenly. For example, a chemical container that breaks during transport can result in harmful substances leaking into the ground, a water system, the air or a surface water drain.

As well as the type of business you run, the location of your operations can have a significant effect on how severe the harm might be if an environmental accident happens. Being close to water systems, recreational areas, protected areas and habitats, schools and hospitals, for example, will place special demands on the activities of your business.

Managing environmental risks

There are environmental risks in a range of activities, for example:

- procuring and storing raw materials, including chemicals
- production and maintenance
- transportation
- product development
- installing and commissioning products
- repairing and servicing products
- managing waste
- using energy and natural resources
- building and demolition.

It’s important to assess the environmental impact of your activities and plans, and to use control measures to minimise the risk of harm. You need to plan what you’ll do to reduce the potential damage in the event of accidents, and to make sure your employees get training. As well as being good environmental practice, it makes good business sense to use energy and natural resources responsibly and to recycle, recover or reuse materials wherever you can.

You should keep records of any contamination to your land. And if you’re thinking of buying land, find out if it’s ever been contaminated.

Tips

- It's worth finding out if it's possible to use the waste you produce (segregate, reuse, recycle and recover). Your waste may be a useful raw material for someone else, and someone else's waste may be a raw material for you. Enquiries about reuse, recycling and recovery can be made at the Environment Agency/Scottish Environment Protection Agency, recyclable waste centres or waste management companies.
- Handling and disposing of hazardous waste is controlled by law. If you have any doubts or need more information, contact the Environment Agency, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Northern Ireland Environment Agency or your local authority.

Useful links

Environmental management

www.netregs.gov.uk (England and Wales)

www.sepa.org.uk (Scotland)

www.ni-environment.gov.uk (Northern Ireland)

Environment Agency

www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Scottish Environment Protection Agency

www.sepa.org.uk

Northern Ireland Environment Agency

www.ni-environment.gov.uk

Local Government Association

www.lga.gov.uk/lga/core/page.do?pagelid=1

Health and Safety Executive – Asbestos waste and recycling pages

www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/index.htm

Health and Safety Executive – Health and safety in the recycling industries

www.hse.gov.uk/waste/index.htm