

BARRIERS TO ACHIEVING ZERO WASTE

Zero Waste presents compelling environmental, economic, and social goals for the 21st century. Successful programs worldwide are already moving toward Zero Waste. But achieving Zero Waste – or even substantially increasing current recovery rates – requires an engaged public willing to question conventional economic wisdom and political practice. Four barriers present key challenges to achieving Zero Waste communities.

Barrier 1 – Government Subsidies Favor Extraction and Waste

▶▶ We need to stop subsidies for wasting industries.

Under resource policies dating as far back as the 1800s, federal and state programs subsidize logging, mining, and waste disposal industries – businesses that compete directly with resource conserving enterprises engaged in cycling used materials back into the marketplace. Whatever subsidies exist for recycling efforts pale in comparison with, for example, the hundreds of billions of dollars in subsidies provided to virgin-resource processors over the past century and to this day. Or the U.S. government's allocation of an average of \$2.6 billion each year just in direct taxpayer subsidies for the resource extraction and waste industries.

America's wasting industries require unsustainable amounts of energy and capital to operate. But instead of subjecting them to fair competition, government policies further underwrite their inefficiency through countless indirect subsidies, like preferential energy pricing, cheap water, and tax credits.

Barrier 2 – The High Cost of Waste is Hidden

▶▶ Make polluters pay so prices reflect real costs.

Most of the cost of waste is hidden, giving wasting industries an invisible competitive advantage. Product prices usually do not reflect their full environmental costs. Damage to ecosystems, loss of habitat and biodiversity, production of greenhouse gases, toxic pollution, health problems, and harm to recreation industries are real costs created by our current system of resource use but not calculated into the price of goods. These costs remain obscured, as consumers pay three separate times for many products: once at the store, again for disposal, and yet again to mitigate environmental damage and health costs. Meanwhile, many of the benefits of resource conservation, such as job creation, community economic development, and energy conservation, are not accounted for in economic transactions and statistics.

The hierarchy of environmental policy says Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, and lastly, Landfill or Incinerate. However, our economy typically operates in reverse, putting landfills and incinerators at the top of the profitability scale because operators can exclude the costs of wasting and rely on public subsidies and guarantees.

“The whole concept of industry's dependence on ever-faster, once-through flow of materials from depletion to pollution is turning from a hallmark of progress into a nagging signal of uncompetitiveness.”

— Hawken, Lovins, and Lovins, *Natural Capitalism*

Barrier 3 – Producers Ignore Responsibility for Products' Environmental Costs

» We can minimize waste by properly assigning responsibility for it.

Manufacturers' choices determine how a product will impact the environment – whether to use virgin or recycled materials, whether to design for reuse or recyclability, what packaging to use, how costly it will be to recycle, whether to sell or lease the product, and so forth. Yet producers have almost no responsibility for disposing or recycling their products in our communities. As long as these functions are provided at taxpayer expense, manufacturers have little incentive to redesign their products or make less wasteful products and packaging.

Producer responsibility initiatives, like producer take-back systems, encourage Zero Waste by providing incentives for innovation in source reduction, durability, and recyclable design. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for waste makes manufacturers responsible for the lifecycle of their products and packaging, providing the missing link between product design and recycling. EPR is not prescriptive – it doesn't tell companies how they must reduce their waste, it simply penalizes them for generating it. Costs are borne by producers and consumers, rather than by taxpayers.

Information and education are the keys to overcoming these barriers. Zero Waste is in the community interest. To get to zero we need to change the rules so that resource-conserving enterprises outcompete resource-wasting businesses. We need local resource management systems that serve the community, and state and federal sustainable materials policies. Together, we'll build communities and businesses that make Zero Waste – or darn close.

RESOURCES

Welfare for Waste: How Federal Taxpayer Subsidies Waste Resources and Discourage Recycling, by GrassRoots Recycling Network, Taxpayers for Common Sense, Friends of the Earth, Materials Efficiency Project, 1999 (www.grrn.org/order/welfare4waste.html)

Wasting and Recycling in the United States 2000, GrassRoots Recycling Network and Institute for Local Self-Reliance, 2000 (www.grrn.org/order/w2kinfo.html)

Natural Capitalism: Creating the Next Industrial Revolution, Paul Hawken, Amory Lovins, and L. Hunter Lovins, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999) (www.natcap.org)

Creating Wealth from Waste, Robin Murray (London: Demos, 1999) (www.grrn.org/order/cwfw_info.html)

Barrier 4 – Inertia of Existing Viewpoints and Practices

» Recycling is a silent revolution in search of an organized voice.

Conventional wisdom has a lot of powerful friends. Changing viewpoints and practices isn't easy. It is simple for local governments to hire a single contractor to manage all municipal discards, and bury or burn the majority. Comprehensive community resource recovery systems, on the other hand, require significant time and ingenuity (though not necessarily more financial resources) to design and develop. True resource recovery systems are information intensive, rather than capital intensive, and require attention to diverse material streams, multiple businesses, and public education and participation. Bankers and investors prefer centralized, capital-intensive projects, like landfills and incinerators, rather than dispersed, labor- and knowledge-intensive community resource recovery projects.

People who recycle every day increasingly sense that, despite their best efforts and intentions, the systems are being made to fail. Absent an understanding of the political and economic dynamics at work, and without all the words to articulate their frustrations, the recycling public will lose out to wasting industries. The language of Zero Waste can translate this emerging public perception into actual practice.