

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: What is Zero Waste?

A: Zero Waste is a simple goal with far-reaching implications. The goal applies to the whole production and consumption cycle – raw material extraction, product design, production practices, how products are sold and delivered, how consumers choose products, and more. Pursuing Zero Waste requires questioning the view of nature as an endless source of raw materials and an endless dumping ground for waste. In fact, Zero Waste advocates see nature as the ultimate production model – a system in which all materials are cycled back for productive reuse and nothing is wasted.

Q: Is Zero Waste the same as 100% reuse, recycling and composting?

A: No. While much of the focus has been at the end of a product's lifecycle, the lion's share of waste and associated environmental destruction happen before consumers see the product on the shelf. Seventy-one garbage cans' worth of industrial waste are produced for each can of discarded products and packaging set out at curbside. This includes waste from mining, clear-cutting timber, oil and gas drilling, as well as from refining and manufacturing those raw materials. Zero Waste applies to our entire environment, our economy and our community.

Q: Aren't other efforts underway to achieve the same thing?

A: Other concepts speak to aspects of Zero Waste but focus on either the production end (clean production, industrial ecology, design for environment and sustainable development) or the disposal end (integrated waste management). Zero Waste encompasses all of these with a comprehensive, whole-system approach, with one set of consistent principles.

Q: Isn't it impossible to get to Zero?

A: No system is 100% efficient. But we know that we can get darn close. By establishing a goal of Zero, public and private organizations can focus on eliminating waste rather than on "managing" it.

Q: Aren't we already recycling as much as possible?

A: Currently, more than two-thirds of "municipal" products, packaging and organics discarded by households, businesses and institutions is wasted (buried in landfills or burned in incinerators). Many communities are diverting 50% or more through waste prevention, reuse, recycling and composting. Yet easily recycled materials continue to be thrown away: 73% of glass containers, 77% of magazines, 75 % of plastic containers, and 45% of newspapers and aluminum beverage cans. In addition, many products today are not designed to be repaired, reused or recycled.

Q: Why can't the free market handle these issues?

A: If the market were truly 'free,' and incorporated the real environmental and social costs in making products, perhaps it could. But markets today are heavily influenced by tax subsidies and incentives that favor extraction and wasteful industries. Environmental damage, reduced quality of life, health effects, social problems and many other costs are not included in the price of products. When taxpayers pick up the tab for waste, manufacturers of wasteful products and packaging lack incentive to eliminate waste or make products recycling-friendly.

“ Zero waste is fundamentally a positive concept. Zero Waste is a design philosophy that can help communities achieve a local economy that operates efficiently, sustains good jobs, and provides a measure of self-sufficiency. ”

— Peter Montague, Environmental Research Foundation

Q: What's the difference whether you use new materials or recycled? Manufacturing is manufacturing.

A: Recycled product manufacturing saves resources and almost always saves significant amounts of energy and water compared to manufacturing with virgin materials, while polluting air and water less. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reports that recycling reduces air pollutants in 10 major categories and water pollutants in eight major categories. Environmental Defense calculates that current U.S. recycling saves enough energy to provide electricity for 9 million homes per year. By 2005, recycling will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 48 million tons, the equivalent of the amount emitted by 36 million cars.

Q: Are you suggesting that we should simply stop extracting and harvesting natural resources?

A: Zero Waste envisions sustainable harvesting of natural resources. While achieving Zero Waste may not totally eliminate virgin materials production, it would significantly reduce the demand. All remaining natural resources would be extracted in environmentally sustainable and careful ways, with impacts and costs translated into the price of the finished product.

Q: Think of the misery and dislocation caused by the loss of so many jobs! How could you suggest such upheaval?

A: The Zero Waste vision is all about building strong communities and local economies. Research by the Washington DC-based Institute for Local Self Reliance shows that only 1 local job is created for every 10,000 tons of solid waste landfilled each year. Composting the same amount creates 4 jobs, recycling it creates 10, and making new products from the recycled materials adds 25 local jobs. In the manufacturing sector, recycling creates more than 1 million U.S. manufacturing jobs alone.

Q: Doesn't recycling cost more than landfilling or incinerating?

A: There are economies of scale for recycling, just as there are for wasting. Recycling systems designed as 'add-ons' to landfill and incineration operations can be inefficient. Although no one expects landfills or incinerators to make money, many cities have proven that well-run recycling programs cost less than wasting and earn money as well.

Q: How can Zero Waste be implemented at the community level?

A: Three essential changes are needed: (1) Public officials must be educated that Zero Waste strategies provide an alternative to landfilling or incineration. (2) Replacement facilities for landfills and incinerators must be developed. All the elements for Recovery Parks exist today, although in pieces; the next big step is to create local policies that build and support working parks. (3) Policies must require maximum feasible separation of discards by material type, and must ensure lifecycle producer responsibility to share the cost of collecting used products and encourage product redesign.

Q: Can we really eliminate landfills and incinerators?

A: We already have the technology to reach a 90% diversion rate in both businesses and communities. Establishing a goal of Zero Waste unleashes ingenuity and resources, and creates the opportunity for developing locally appropriate breakthrough strategies. Reaching Zero Waste will take the efforts of all segments of society, including corporations, politicians, community leaders and citizens.