

Wasting and Recycling in the United States 2000

GrassRoots Recycling Network

Acknowledgements & Table of Contents

Prepared by Brenda Platt and Neil Seldman

Institute for Local Self-Reliance

Washington, DC

About the GrassRoots Recycling Network

The GrassRoots Recycling Network (GRRN) is a North American network of recycling and community-based activists who advocate policies and practices to achieve zero waste, to end corporate welfare for waste, and to create sustainable jobs from discards. GRRN advocates changing outmoded government subsidies and tax policies that promote wasting and inhibit resource conservation, and implementing extended producer responsibility for product and packaging waste. GRRN was founded in 1995 by members of the Sierra Club Solid Waste Committee, the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, and the California Resource Recovery Association.

GrassRoots Recycling Network
P.O. Box 49283
Athens, GA 30604-9283
Network Coordinator: Bill Sheehan
706-613-7121 • Fax 706-613-7123
Email: zerowaste@grrn.org • Web site: <http://www.grrn.org>

About the Institute for Local Self-Reliance

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) is a nonprofit research and educational organization that provides technical assistance and information to city and state governments, citizen organizations, and industry. Since 1974, ILSR has researched the technical feasibility and commercial viability of environmentally sound, state-of-the-art technologies with a view to strengthening local economies. ILSR works to involve citizens, government, and private enterprise in the development of a comprehensive materials policy oriented towards local ownership, efficiency, recycling, and maximum utilization of renewable energy sources.

The Institute for Local Self-Reliance
2425 18th Street, NW
Washington, DC 20009
(202) 232-4108 • Fax (202) 332-0463
Email: ilsr@igc.org • Web site: <http://www.ilsr.org>

Copyright 2000 by the GrassRoots Recycling Network.

All rights reserved.

No part of this document may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the GrassRoots Recycling Network, Athens, Georgia.

Printed by Ecoprint of Silver Spring, Maryland, on 100% postconsumer recycled paper. The inside text pages are also processed chlorine free. The ink is a 100% vegetable oil product, which has been specially formulated to be free from environmentally toxic metals.

Ecoprint maintains innovative labor and management practices, which include sharing of profits and a no-layoff policy, as well as a commitment to supporting numerous conservation organizations.

table of contents

Acknowledgments .....	.iii
Executive Summary .....	.v
Introduction .....	.1
Our Profligate Consumption Fouls the Nest .....	.1
Wasting Destroys Materials, Forcing Us to Extract New Ones .....	.2
Wasting Grows in the Absence of Adequate Cost Accounting, Manufacturer Responsibility, and Public Sector Policies .....	.2
Zero Waste: A New Paradigm for the Future .....	.6
The State of Wasting .....	.9
Introduction .....	.9
Wasting Amounts and Rates .....	.10
Despite Rising Recycling Rates, We Are Wasting More .....	.10
Interstate Shipments Are on the Rise .....	.10
Product Trends Point to More Wasting .....	.11
Startling Quantities of Commonly-Recycled Materials Are Landfilled or Incinerated .....	.12
Wasting Household Products and Packaging Means More Mining, Manufacturing and Industrial Waste .....	.13
Wasting Has Major Liabilities .....	.14
Upstream Liabilities .....	.14
Extraction, Production, and Consumption Threaten Environmental and Human Health .....	.14
Downstream Liabilities .....	.16
Landfills Pollute and Threaten Public Health .....	.16
Incinerators Have Proven Environmental and Economic Pitfalls .....	.17
Composting Mixed Trash Is Garbage in, Garbage out .....	.19
Economics of Wasting .....	.19
Taxpayers Subsidize Resource Extraction and Wasting .....	.19
Waste Is an Unfunded Mandate .....	.20
Industry Consolidation Points to More Wasting .....	.21
The State of Recycling .....	.23
Introduction .....	.23
The Benefits of Waste Prevention, Reuse, and Recycling .....	.24
Waste Prevention, Reuse, and Recycling Conserve Resources and Reduce Pollution .....	.24
Recycling Reduces Greenhouse Gas Emissions .....	.25
Waste Reduction and Recycling Reduce Costs .....	.26
Recycling Means Business .....	.27
Recycling is Close to the People .....	.29
Recycling Advances .....	.29
National Recycling Rates Are Increasing Despite Unlevel Playing Field .....	.33
Many Communities and Businesses Have Achieved Record-Setting Waste Reduction Levels .....	.33
Composting of Yard Debris Can Divert a Significant Portion of the Discards Stream .....	.33
Product Reuse Has Taken Root .....	.35
Pay-as-you-throw Trash Fees are an Effective Waste Reduction Strategy .....	.35
Disposal Bans Have Spurred Recycling .....	.36
Beverage Container Deposits Have Been Highly Successful .....	.36
State and Local Recycling Goals and Requirements Have Helped Increase Recycling .....	.36
Buy-Recycled Programs Have Increased Demand for Recycled Products .....	.37
Minimum Recycled-Content Legislation, Requirements, and Goals .....	.38
Have Helped Build Markets for Recovered Materials .....	.38

Creative Funding Mechanisms Have Boosted Recycling-Based Industries	39
The Private Sector Has Stepped Up to the Plate	40
Recycling Backslides	41
Corporations Backtrack on Their Commitment to Recycle	41
Waste Prevention Garners Lip Service	42
States and Cities Back Away from Recycling	43
States Did Not Reach Their Recycling Goals	43
Conclusion	44
Agenda for Action	45
Government Action — Changing the Rules	46
Level the Economic Playing Field for Resource Conservation	46
Make Manufacturers Share Responsibility for Their Product and Packaging Waste	48
Develop Holistic Resource Management Systems	49
Build the Reuse and Recycling Infrastructure	52
Corporate Action — Accepting Responsibility for Production and Consumption	54
Citizen Action — Organize and Press for Changes	54
Footnotes	56
List of Tables	
Wasting Rates of Commonly Discarded Items, 1997	13
Toxic Metals Identified in Waste Incinerator Emissions and Ash	17
Comparison of Energy Savings from Recycling and Incineration	18
Federal Subsidies for Virgin Materials Extraction.	19
Environmental Benefits of Recycling	25
Job Creation: Reuse and Recycling Vs. Disposal	27
State Policies in Selected High Recovery States	32
Select Community Waste Reduction Record-Setters.	33
Select Institutional and Commercial Sector Waste Reduction Record-Setters.	35
State Recycled-Content Laws (Non Newsprint).	38
State Recycled-Content Newsprint Laws	39
Unmet State Recycling Goals	44
List of Figures	
Municipal Materials Discarded, 1960-1997	10
Exports of Municipal Discards, 1997	11
Imports of Municipal Discards, 1997	11
Recycling Rates by Material, 1990-1996	12
Production and Recovery of Plastic Beverage Containers, 1980-1997	13
Materials Wasted Per Year	14
Energy Used in Virgin-Material Vs. Recycled Content Products	24
Recycling Rate for Beer and Soft Drink Containers, 1998	36
List of Sidebars	
A Note on Terminology	3
Moving Toward A Zero Waste Economy	7
The Real Landfill Crisis	16
The Real Cost of Wasting	19
Businesses Save Millions of Dollars by Reducing Waste	26
The Last Four Decades — A History of Recycling	30
Select Community Waste Reduction Record-Setters.	34
Purchasing Decisions Have an Environmental Impact	37
Examples of Products Made by Recycling-Based Manufacturers.	40
Producer Responsibility Policies Commonplace Outside the U.S.	50

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was made possible by the generous support of the Turner Foundation, The Florence and John Schumann Foundation, Merck Family Fund, Californians Against Waste, and the Alameda County Waste Management Authority and Recycling Board. Brenda Platt and Neil Seldman, Ph.D., of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance (ILSR) researched and authored the report. ILSR research associate Kelly Lease and intern Annemie Berding contributed to the research. Mary Lou Van Deventer and Dan Knapp (Urban Ore, Berkeley, California) deserve special recognition for their thorough edits of part of this document. Special thanks to the following individuals for reviewing and improving this document:

Susan Alexander, Public Media Center, San Francisco, CA
Rick Anthony, Richard Anthony Associates, San Diego, CA
Rick Best, Policy Director, Californians Against Waste, Sacramento, CA
Ed Boisson, Principal, Boisson & Associates, Brattleboro, VT
Resa Dimino, Sustainable Enterprise, City Island, NY
Kathy Evans, Canyon, CA
Pat Franklin, Executive Director, Container Recycling Institute, Arlington, VA
Lance King, Livewell Environmental Designs & Resources, Arlington, VA
David Kirkpatrick, Managing Director, Sustainable Jobs Fund, Durham, NC
Dan Knapp, Ph.D., and Mary Lou Van Deventer, Urban Ore, Inc., Berkeley, CA
Eric Lombardi, Executive Director, Eco-Cycle, Boulder, CO
David Morris, Institute for Local Self-Reliance, Minneapolis, MN
John Reindl, Recycling Manager, Dane County Department of Public Works, Madison, WI
Bill Sheehan, Ph.D., Network Coordinator, GrassRoots Recycling Network, Athens, GA
Helen Spiegelman, Society Promoting Environmental Conservation, Vancouver, BC, Canada
David Wood, Senior Associate, Center on Wisconsin Strategy, Madison, WI

All responsibility for the views expressed in this report or for any errors in it rests with the authoring organizations.