Wasting and Recycling in the United States 2000

GrassRoots Recycling Network

Executive Summary

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In the last decade and a half, waste prevention, reuse and recycling have made tremendous gains. The national municipal recycling rate has reached 28%, while many communities are surpassing 50% diversion from landfills and incinerators, and doing so cost-effectively. More than 9,300 communities had curbside recycling programs in 1998, up from 2,700 at the beginning of the decade. Reduction of private sector and industrial process wastes has similarly increased, with some businesses approaching 90% and higher waste reduction levels.

The benefits of waste reduction are more far reaching than previously thought. Recycling reduces costs, creates jobs and businesses, and improves the environment and public health in myriad ways. When a pound of municipal material is recycled, industry avoids wasting many more pounds of mining and manufacturing wastes caused by extracting and processing virgin materials into finished goods. Using recycled materials to make new products saves energy and other resources, reduces greenhouse gases and industrial pollution, and stems deforestation and damage to fragile ecosystems.

Waste reduction also reduces the negative effects of landfilling and burning materials. For landfills, these effects include groundwater pollution, release of global warming gases, and monitoring and remediation costs that will likely span centuries. Incinerators may even be worse, as pollution is borne directly to the air as well as to the land as ash; and energy wasted by not recycling is greater than the amount of energy produced via burning.

Despite these benefits, unsustainable patterns of wasting and consumption hinder further progress in recycling. Recent trends indicate wasting is on the rise and is outpacing the rise in recycling:

- After several years of leveling off and then dropping, municipal wasting increased again in 1997, both in absolute tons and on a per capita basis. Materials landfilled and incinerated rose 4.4 million tons in 1997 (the latest year for which data are available) as compared to 1996.
- Municipal recycling rates since 1994 have increased only slightly, after rapidly increasing in the late 1980s and early 1990s.
- The portion of plastic, aluminum, and glass containers landfilled and burned is rising. In 1998, 75% of plastic PET (no. 1) containers were wasted, up from 60% in 1995. The wasting rate for aluminum cans has climbed from a low of 36% in 1992 to 44% in 1998.
- Manufacturers are producing more products and packaging that are hard to recycle or lack recycled-content. From 1990 to 1997, plastic packaging grew five times faster by weight than plastic recovered for recycling.
- The waste hauling industry continues to consolidate, leading to less recycling. Big hauling companies that are vertically integrated with wasting facilities make more money by landfilling than recycling.
- Some states are considering rescinding recycling goals and policies. A few cities have opted to cut back their recycling budgets. Some industries — particularly the plastic industry — have not followed through on commitments to utilize more recycled material.

Several factors contribute to the increase in wasting. For one, manufacturers and sellers of products and packaging usually have no responsibility for handling materials once discarded. Secondly, recycling competes with raw materials processing and wasting industries on an uneven economic playing field:

- Prices of virgin materials and products (which compete with recovered materials) exclude billions of dollars in taxpayer subsidies, and the true costs that resource extraction and manufacturing impose on the environment and public health.
- Prices for waste disposal (which competes with reuse and recycling for the supply of discarded materials) do not reflect the cost of perpetual landfill maintenance, among other externalities.
- The economic development benefits of recycling are often overlooked (recycling creates at least ten times more jobs than landfills).

The Introduction to this report describes the need for a new paradigm for managing resources sustainably. Zero waste is a design principle for a society that makes products with a minimum investment of natural resources and energy, and in which the end-of-life options for those products are limited to reuse, recycle, repair, and compost. Zero waste implies that the goal of public policy should be to eliminate waste rather than manage it in waste facilities.

Fortunately, technological developments, citizen activism, and public policies in the last 15 years have laid the groundwork for a zero waste and sustainable future. Container deposit laws, curbside collection, recycling requirements, landfill disposal bans, and creative funding mechanisms have increased the supply of recyclable materials. States with minimum recycled-content legislation, buy-recycled programs, and creative funding mechanisms have also begun to spur demand for discarded materials and link recycling with local economic development. Much more remains to be done to reduce waste and increase reuse and recycling.

Two major sections of this report describe the state of wasting and recycling, respectively, in the United States. These sections point to the need to reinvigorate citizen activism and maintain and expand public policies to eliminate waste and conserve resources. To this end, the report concludes with an Agenda for Action that proposes an interconnected, four-part government strategy for moving toward zero waste:

- level the economic playing field so resource conservation businesses can out-compete wasting industries;
- make manufacturers and brand owners share responsibility for their product and packaging waste;
- develop holistic resource management systems, linking zero waste planning to building sustainable communities; and
- build the reuse and recycling infrastructure.

This report is not intended as an exhaustive study on the subject of wasting and recycling. Rather, it aims to refocus attention on critical issues, highlight their interconnectedness, and shed light on the need for a zero waste economy.