

PRO/CON: Should the U.S. scrap the recycling program?

By Tribune News Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 01.04.16

Word Count **1,429**



Adonis Herring sorts cans and bottles at Capital Redemption Center on Sept. 22, 2015, in Albany, New York. The center offers refunds on empty beverage containers before they are transported to distributors and recycled. AP/Mike Groll

PRO: It costs too much and it really doesn't work

If you're worried about the planet, please make sure your garbage is buried in a landfill. There's plenty of space available.

On the surface, the phrase "reduce, reuse, recycle" may seem like a sensible call to action. It makes particular sense to those who want to limit the amount of carbon dioxide we release into the air when we burn fossil fuels like gas and coal, and reduce the amount of waste left behind for future generations.

The reality, however, is that the cost of the recycling process almost always outweighs the benefits.

Going By The Numbers

Even the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) says it only makes sense economically and environmentally to recycle about 35 percent of our trash. Among those materials are paper and aluminum cans, according to the government department.

Recycling 1 ton of paper or aluminum cans, the agency says, can save about 3 tons of carbon dioxide emissions over producing new materials. Carbon dioxide is produced during the recycling process and can lead to climate change. A ton equals 2,000 pounds.

But not so fast.

Paper mills pay for the trees they process. If it was cost-effective to recycle scrap paper, paper companies would be beating down your door to buy it — but they aren't.

That means it's more expensive and takes more energy and water to recycle old paper than to cut down and process pine trees and then plant pine seedlings.

Plastic provides another problem. Given the recent dramatic decline in oil prices, it is now cheaper to make a new plastic container than to recycle an old one.

Even if that were not true, the EPA says that recycling a ton of plastic saves only about a ton of carbon dioxide. However, that estimate doesn't take into account the water most consumers use to rinse their plastic containers before they put them into a recycling bin.

New York Times science writer John Tierney recently wrote an article, citing the work of author Chris Goodall. He wrote, "If you wash plastic in water that was heated by coal-derived electricity, then the net effect of your recycling could be more carbon in the atmosphere."

Emotion Over Reason

Glass is an even worse recyclable. To reduce emissions by 1 ton you have to recycle 3 tons of glass. If you include the cost of collecting glass in small quantities from neighborhoods, and the pollution produced by the collection trucks and the recycling process itself, glass recycling creates more emissions. It is also more expensive than making new glass, which comes primarily from sand, an abundant raw material.

No wonder many municipalities across the country continue to pick up glass in recycling trucks only to dump it at the local landfill.

Why the charade? Because "reduce, reuse, recycle" is an emotional slogan, not reasonable environmental policy. Years of brainwashing make most Americans blind to the actual evidence surrounding recycling programs.

By sending an extra fleet of trucks around town once a week, supporters of recycling actually are not protecting the environment.

It doesn't help that the rise of the recycling movement has created a powerful group of people who pressure politicians to keep things the way they are.

More intelligent environmental policies would consider the costs and benefits of recycling programs. They should scrap those that are wasteful and harmful to the environment.

If recycling was truly cost-effective, companies would be lined up at your doorstep to buy your trash and make money from it. Don't look now, because they're not there.

The true recycling test is whether someone is willing to pay you to sort and save your trash. If they're not, what you've been told about recycling in the past is probably just garbage.

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CON: Recycling stops us from being so wasteful

We Americans consume a lot and waste a lot, which means we dump far more trash than is necessary into landfills. In fact, we produce twice as much waste per person as Western Europe.

The amount of municipal solid waste produced annually in the United States has tripled since 1960, and in 2013, it totaled 254 million tons. That's 4.4 pounds per person every day.

We've made a lot of progress over the years in how we handle this waste. Recycling jumped dramatically nationwide after the mid-1980s. It leveled off around 2010, with the average American recycling or composting 34 percent of his waste.

The rate varies by the type of waste, and by state and city. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) reports that we recycle 99 percent of lead acid batteries, 67 percent of paper, and 55 percent of aluminum cans. Yet, we recycle only 40 percent of electronics such as cellphones and computers, only 34 percent of glass containers and just 30 percent of plastic bottles and jars.

Charging For Trash Encourages Recycling

We should be able to do much better than this. So why don't we? Individual habits are one explanation. Many people think recycling is not convenient, even in cities that send trucks house to house to collect recyclables. A number of states mandate recycling, but they don't enforce their laws, and in most cases they offer few incentives to recycle.

Some states and cities do much better because they take recycling seriously. Cities such as Seattle, Washington, charge fees when people throw out garbage to encourage recycling. These fees are proportional to the amount of garbage put out for collection, a so-called pay-as-you-throw system. Even if the cost is small, it's an important incentive to encourage people to recycle, and they do.

Seattle had a 50 percent recycling rate in 2014, and a 71 percent rate for single-family households, and the rate continues to improve. The city has set a goal of eliminating the "maximum possible amount of waste." Few other cities are so ambitious.

Some critics see matters differently. They argue that recycling is too costly and ineffective to continue, and some states seem to agree with them. They have balked at paying part of the cost of municipal recycling, saying that cities should end their programs or pay for the cost themselves.

An Important Question

Is this the right action to take, that we should recycle only if it generates enough benefits? Doing that would send exactly the wrong message as cities and businesses across the nation try to build a new commitment to the sustainable use of resources.

Some experts believe that we should start by redesigning factories where possible to prevent or minimize waste in the first place. Then to the extent possible, we should reuse what is left over, and only then throw out anything that cannot be recycled.

No one argues that the cost of recycling is unimportant. But there are ways to deal with that cost rather than declare it over the top and abandon recycling programs. We could follow the lead of the most innovative cities by putting a price on trash. If people have to pay more, they will find ways to reduce the amount of trash they throw out, as will businesses, and the fees can cover the cost of recycling programs.

Think about what else such fees might do to reduce extra packaging and wasted food. We toss out about 40 percent of the food we buy. This is one reason why several large cities, including San Francisco, California, and Seattle, now require household composting.

We are in the early stages of an important sustainability transition that will focus on efficiency throughout a product's life cycle, reducing the environmental impact, and rethinking business and household consumption. That's the way to go.

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