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SPECIAL SECTION

ENVIRONMENT

Recycling efforts: Has the time come to revisit economic effects?

By Jean Gossman

Since the 1970s, waste recycling has given Americans a warm and fuzzy feeling that comes from more than just wearing their made-from-soda-bottles Polartec fleece while lugging their sorted household waste out to the curb. Recycling initiatives are found at every level of government, from the Office of the Federal Environmental Executive's National Recycling Challenge down to public school classrooms. Local clean-up days boost community spirit and environmental consciousness. State and locally mandated recycling programs tout the benefits of litter reduction, freed landfill space and the local jobs created by recycling.



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Recycling advocates say it is cheaper than garbage collection.

But broader questions are being raised about the genuine environmental and economic value of mandatory recycling, especially as cleaner waste incineration methods are developed. Incineration reduces the volume of combustible trash by 100 to 300 times, while reducing its weight by about 95 percent. It is the typical waste management solution in small, congested Western European countries, as well as island nations.

Not surprisingly, one innovative firm in this field, Tredi, is from New Zealand. Tredi has developed oxygen-fired burners with ionizing wet scrubbers that burn hotter and cleaner. Super-hot incineration has also been perfected in Great Britain, partly in response to the foot-and-mouth disease scare. Mobile incinerators can treat waste at abandoned agricultural or industrial facilities, avoiding the need for costly and hazardous off-site treatment.

Recycling critics cite the environmental dangers of recycling itself, such as the hazardous waste produced by de-inking old newspapers. They also assert that recycling programs have high costs, including not only collection and administration, but also public relations campaigns, workshops for government officials and teachers, as well as school programs. A 1994 Cato Institute analysis of recycling noted that "because many of the direct costs are hidden and diffuse, there is very little political resistance to recycling."

Moreover, many detractors of recycling argue that the actual demand for goods made from post-consumer materials is vastly exceeded by the supply of the materials. Their bottom line is that the free market should drive waste management solutions. It has long been more profitable to recycle corrugated boxes and auto scrap than to manufacture new goods; this is done without government mandate.

Perhaps the best-known recycling success story is that of Malden Mills' Polartec fleece. In 1981, the firm introduced the hugely popular polyester apparel fabric, partially manufactured from plastic soda bottles. One average size jacket uses 25 two-liter soda bottles.

On the other hand, the supply of used newspaper is much greater than the demand for new newsprint. And animal bedding and packing material require additional processing to shred, adding cost to recycling.

The Cato report boldly goes on, "Mandatory recycling creates waste and destroys wealth without solving any problems. It is the equivalent of Soviet planning: The state first micromanages an economic activity and then builds an elaborate system of controls and subsidies to sustain it. Resources are wasted to generate recyclables, and then resources are wasted to encourage their use."

A Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) report on the issue reminds taxpayers that, whatever recycling subsidies might amount to, they are dwarfed by direct and indirect subsidies and tax breaks to virgin-resource producers. Municipal trash removal is simply a necessity, and recycling proponents point out that recycling expenses are smaller than those of traditional garbage collection, which does not have the potential to generate its own revenue. NRDC also points to a secondary benefit of recycling: Consumers now take a hard look at how products are made, and ultimately disposed of, before they buy them.

Information Age products continue to challenge accepted waste management practices and environmental safety. Used computers, batteries and, increasingly, cellular phones are rapidly adding to the waste stream and demand workable solutions. Even if recycling in general won't "save the Earth," or even a state or county, renewed debate and new primary research on market-based and community-oriented recycling programs may allow citizens on all sides of the environmental debate to effectively "think globally and act locally" as they clear glass bottles from roadsides on a Saturday morning, snug in their fleece anoraks.