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CURRENTS

Growing Pains

Recycling is Maturing, and Facing New Challenges

by Becca Manning

When Ohio University recycling manager Ed Newman wants to see how the campus is recycling he goes right to the heart of the matter—into the dumpster. Though numbers show that students and faculty are recycling a decent 25 to 30 percent of residence and dining hall trash, Newman finds a different story when he goes on a "dumpster dive" into one of the university containers. On his last dive, he found that 65 to 70 percent of the dumpster's contents were recyclable. While recycling numbers on campus are holding steady, the amount of reusable or recyclable materials still being discarded is growing.

There are more than 9,000 curbside recycling programs in the U.S., accounting for more than 50 to 60 percent of the municipal waste stream in many cities. But plastic bottle recycling is down.
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Since the first recycling drop-off centers were established in 1970, community recycling programs have expanded to more than 9,000 curbside programs nationwide. In major U.S. cities, recycling accounts for as much as 50 to 60 percent of the municipal solid waste stream—a number that critics 10 years ago said could not be reached. Such cities as Portland (Oregon), Seattle, Chicago and San Jose showcase recycling success stories and give advocates hope.

"If you don't recycle you can't consider yourself an environmentalist," says Neil Seldman, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Institute for Local Self-Reliance. But while recycling has become established in some cities, the national recycling rate has stagnated at 30 percent since the 1990s. With tough economic times, many recycling programs are among the first on the chopping block—often saved by community outcries. Further opposition to recycling comes from the virgin materials industries, including timber and mining, from the waste-hauling industry and other anti-recycling political and corporate groups.

Recycling is also confusing for consumers, according to a study presented at the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) Congress last year by advertising agency DDB Bass & Howes. "We've all been so focused on creating this business that we've not done a good job of listening to customers—Americans at home and at work who want to recycle," says Kate Kreb, executive director of NRC.

In particular, the movement needs to improve education, Kreb says. NRC is working to design standard recycling icons like the familiar circling arrows that will be instantly recognizable.

NRC also is working to dispel many of the myths associated with recycling, such as the idea that it costs more than it can contribute to the economy. In fact, according to an NRC study, recycling is a strong business, larger than either the mining or waste industries in the United States, with jobs that pay more than manufacturing. Another common myth—that materials do not get recycled even when put in the right bins—developed from a few exaggerated incidents.

Whether because of these myths or other factors, the amount of traditional solid waste materials such as plastic and aluminum beverage containers being recycled has decreased. According to the National Association of PET Container Resources, the PET plastic bottle recycling rate dropped from 39.7 percent in 1995 to 19.9 percent in 2002. Aluminum can recycling dropped to 49.2 percent—its lowest rate since 1980, according to the Container Recycling Institute.

One of the main causes of this decrease is the enormous growth of container production, says CRI research director Jenny Gitlitz. PET sales have skyrocketed as the bottled water industry has

exploded (see “Message in a Bottle,” cover story, September/October 2003). Curbside programs are not convenient for the increasing numbers of people consuming these beverages away from home. And current recycling systems cannot hope to match the sheer numbers of products being produced.

Bottle bills, which shift the burden of responsibility for beverage waste from the taxpayer to the producer by forcing manufacturers to design container refund systems of 2.5 to 10 cents, operate in 11 states. Studies have shown that the recycling rates in bottle bill states are much higher than the average.

The best way to address the rising number of containers is to create new bottle bills in states without them, Gitlitz says, and to adjust old bills for inflation. But opponents of bottle bills, including the Connecticut-based Keep America Beautiful, are a major obstacle, Gitlitz says.

Even when materials do manage to avoid the garbage can, other issues arise that may prevent them from being cycled back into new products. Many U.S. cities have adopted single-stream recycling systems using compactor trucks, but the broken and blended materials contaminate other products, particularly paper, since glass shards imbed in paper fibers and reduce or destroy their quality. “The quality of curbside material in single-stream systems has deteriorated significantly,” says Tex Corley, president and CEO of the Houston-based glass recycling company Strategic Materials. In the worst cases, as much as 50 percent of the volume of collected glass is actually made up of contaminants.

Recycled glass takes less energy than raw materials to melt. In fact, the demand for recycled glass far exceeds the available supply, Corley says. But low-quality glass is expensive to process, he adds, so more and more contaminated material is “recycled” for use in road construction or as landfill cover.

A new trend in the movement is coalition building toward the ultimate goal of “zero waste.” Networks of groups with a broader interest than just solid waste have replaced state recycling associations as the main force of the recycling movement, Seldman says. Such groups as the GrassRoots Recycling Network (GRRN) and the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives connect activists from across the country and around the world.

Bill Sheehan helped found the GRRN in 1995 and recently left to organize the Georgia-based Product Policy Project. The project focuses on shifting responsibility for product waste from the consumer and communities to the producer. Recycling is not enough, he says, because “the real heart of the matter” lies in the production.

“The makers of products need to take physical or financial responsibility,” Sheehan says. “Corporations should be made to adopt a ‘cradle-to-cradle’ management of their products.” Seldman says there has already been considerable progress in this movement with batteries, computers, paints and building materials, to name a few.

Sheehan would also like to see the U.S. adopt programs that have worked in European countries. Seldman points out that the developing producer responsibility laws in Europe are causing a revolution, “which will force U.S. companies to comply if they want to sell their products on that continent.”

On a local level, recycling programs are finding success in linking up with community sustainability groups, and they benefit from some new laws, such as state tax exemptions on recycling equipment. The combination of all these efforts will give recycling new life and help people realize both immediate and long-term environmental results. “Recycling can be slowed down but it will never be defeated,” says Seldman.