

WASTE NEWS

Can recycling script is getting old

by Jenny Gitlitz June 07, 2004



The aluminum beverage can recycling rate has tumbled to its lowest level in 25 years. Whether one subscribes to the Aluminum Association's figures (50 percent in 2003, down from 53 percent in 2002) or the Container Recycling Institute's rate, which deducts imported beverage cans (44 percent, down from 48 percent in 2002), there is no dispute that the recycling of cans is down in the dumps.

Between 1972, when the Aluminum Association began collecting data, and 2003, over 1 trillion cans were wasted. An estimated 17.5 million tons of cans with a current market value of \$21 billion lie buried in American garbage dumps and landfills.

By every measure - percent, weight, and units - aluminum beverage can recycling has fallen for 11 years. The Aluminum Association chose to ignore this in a recent press release, preferring the oft-recycled statement that cans are America's "most recycled consumer beverage package." Granted. But while the competition - glass and plastic bottles - is flunking out with rates in the 20 percent range, the aluminum industry's gentleman's C is not exactly something to be proud of. Especially for a package whose recyclability is its main environmental selling point.

The industry has never had a weaker environmental leg to stand on. Replacing the 55 billion cans wasted last year (the most ever) with new cans made from virgin materials squandered the equivalent of over 20 million barrels of crude oil, and generated more than 3.5 million tons of greenhouse gases and other emissions.

The uncomfortable reality is that the Aluminum Association and its members are forced into adhering to a Pollyanna script. Like bottle makers, can makers would benefit from the increased availability of clean scrap, but they observe a collective gag rule when it comes to advocating

deposit systems. Instead, to appease their beverage customers, they keep towing out token programs.

Cans for Habitat makes good PR, but has no effect on the recycling rate. Recycle Pete isn't cutting it. Glass Recycles hasn't improved green glass markets. If container recycling rates are to rise to respectable levels, permanent changes in the collection infrastructure are needed - not programs that are event-based, publicity-focused, or tied to specific community goals or volunteer recruitment.

The 1990s establishment of curbside recycling programs was infrastructural, but could not counterbalance the trends of stagnant aluminum can scrap values, the disappearance of buybacks, increased away-from-home consumption, and growing consumer apathy about recycling. The only programs to consistently achieve recycling rates of 70 to 85 percent are nickel deposit systems. Michigan, the only state with a dime deposit, reaches 95 percent. Deposits speak louder than bumper stickers, radio PSAs, zany billboards, and other altruistic appeals.

Can makers know that a national 10-cent deposit, like the bill proposed by Sen. Jim Jeffords and co-sponsored by Sen. John Kerry, could achieve recycling rates of 80 to 90 percent. But the beer and soft drink brand owners and bottlers have a chilling effect on their ability to support deposits. The fear of losing additional market share to polyethylene terephthalate is enough to make them stick to their script in perpetuity.

Or is it? It's only a matter of time before the environmental community decides that the annual landfilling of 55 billion cans - 820,000 tons of aluminum - is unacceptable, and calls for a consumer boycott. The time to break ranks and preserve the long-term future of the can is now.

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