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Recycling Myths Dispelled

Excerpts from "Anti-Recycling Myths Commentary on 'Recycling is Garbage'"
(John Tierney, *New York Times Magazine*, June 30, 1996)
Authors: Richard A. Denison, Ph. D.; John F. Ruston

Myth #1: The modern recycling movement is a product of a false "crisis" in landfill space created by the media and environmentalists.

Fact: Concentrating on landfill space misses the point. The greatest environmental benefits of recycling occur in reducing natural resource damage and pollution that arise when extracting raw materials and manufacturing new products. For more information about the economic and environmental benefits of recycling, visit <http://www.recyclemoreminnesota.org/why>.

Myth #2: I put it out at the curb and they just throw it all away.

Fact: It is Minnesota law that if something is collected for recycling it must be recycled.

Myth #3: Landfill space is cheap and abundant.

Fact: Landfill space is a commodity, priced according to supply and demand. The majority of the growth of recycling in the United States has occurred in populated regions where landfills are expensive relative to the U.S. average. In Minnesota, no new landfill has been established since the late 1980s, due in part to public opposition.

Myth #4: Recycling should pay for itself.

Fact: We don't expect landfills or incinerators to pay for themselves, nor should we expect this of recycling. The real issue is how recycling costs add to the system over the long term compared to those of alternative methods of waste management. Taking a snap shot of recycling costs early in the life of existing programs is misleading, because of substantial efficiencies gained as these programs innovate and mature. Current experience shows well-run community recycling programs can be cost-competitive with disposal options, as are the vast majority of commercial recycling programs. In addition, recycling benefits are far reaching from energy savings, reduced pollution, and improved economics so it is important for all communities to be involved and do their part.

Myth #5: There are no markets for recyclable materials.

Fact: Recycling is not just an alternative to traditional solid waste disposal; it is the foundation for large, robust manufacturing industries in the United States that use recycled materials. These businesses are an important part of our economy and provide the market foundation for the entire recycling process. The volume of the major scrap materials sold in domestic and global markets is growing steadily. As with all commodities, prices fluctuate over time.

Myth #6: Recycling doesn't "save trees" because we are growing at least as many trees as we cut specifically to make paper.

Fact: Recycling reduces the pressure to turn natural forests into tree farms, creating substantial environmental and economic benefits. This effect is even more pronounced when paper recycling is viewed on a global level.

Myth #7: Stringent U.S. regulations ensure the environmental harms of manufacturing and using products are incorporated into their prices.

Fact: Many of the costs that arise from environmental impact of virgin materials extraction, manufacturing, consumption and disposal are not included in prices paid when products are bought and sold.

Myth #8: Misguided laws and regulations compel manufacturers to make costly changes in their packaging and products.

Fact: The asserted influence of legislation on the character of production processes, products and packaging is grossly overstated. The vast majority of environmental improvements manufacturers have made in products and packaging are cost-cutting measures or voluntary responses to customer demand.

Myth #9: Recycling is nearing its maximum potential.

Fact: Enormous room for growth in recycling remains— even for the most-recycled materials. In fact, over 1.3 million tons of material thrown out each year in Minnesota could be easily recycled. Composting also holds strong potential, and we're just getting started on waste reduction, the most important step of all.

Myth #10: Recycling is a time-consuming burden on the public.

Fact: Convenient, well-designed recycling programs allow Minnesotans to take action in their daily lives to reduce the environmental impact of the products they consume. Informing citizens of the costs of their own consumption and disposal activities through "pay as you throw" user fees makes economic and environmental sense— but only if viable recycling and composting programs are in place.

About Recycle More Minnesota

The Recycle More Minnesota campaign is a joint effort between the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and the Recycling Association of Minnesota to help increase awareness about recycling throughout the state. Established in 2008, we are working with our partners to promote recycling at home, work and on the go, with the goal of increasing the state recycling rate to 50% by 2011 through educational and social marketing efforts.

Help us track the use of this campaign!

This toolkit was provided by the MPCA and RAM as a part of the Recycle More Minnesota education campaign. Please help us track the use of this campaign. Please send an e-mail to info@recyclemoreminnesota.org with a description of how and when the materials were used and, if published, the estimated circulation of the publication. If you have any questions about the campaign, please contact us at (651) 296-6300.