

## America Recycles Day Should Be Every Day

By Carmen Becker | Dec. 2, 2015

America Recycles Day came and went without much fanfare this year. Yet it is still a powerful reminder to us not only how far recycling has come since it became a mainstream practice in the 1970s, but also that it still faces significant challenges.

Recycling is at a crossroads as commodities' prices are down and processing costs are up. These economics have prompted critics to question the validity of recycling and its future. Yet this comes at a time when we have come to realize that the earth holds a dwindling supply of natural resources to manufacture products, and without recycling and other efforts to preserve those resources, that supply may decline more quickly. In truth, the ups and downs of recycling are nothing new.



"It's a commodity business and has always been prone to some volatility," says Jason Pelz, vice president of recycling, Carton Council, and vice president, environment, Tetra Pak Americas. "Prices and demand have always fluctuated, yet recycling is still typically less expensive than landfilling or burning materials in a waste energy facility: about \$3 per household a month. However, people expect it to be profitable."

Still, one of the most compelling reasons to champion recycling, and continue to pay for this service, is that it's essential to keep materials in the resource stream and available for future use, says Pelz.

### Recycling Has Come Far Since Its Beginnings

So far, recycling has helped to do that. When the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) started tracking recycling statistics in 1960, the national rate was about 10%. In 2012, the last year on record, it had risen to 34.5%, according to the EPA.

Recycling also has helped industries make strides toward conserving the planet's finite supply of resources. For example, from 1994-2012, the number of U.S. households rose by 25% while packaging waste declined from 36% to 30% of the total waste stream, indicating, in part, that recycling efforts are becoming more effective, notes a waste expert in *Live Science*. Another encouraging fact is in 2012 51.5% of containers and packaging in the U.S. municipal solid waste stream were recycled, according to the EPA.

Despite these improvements, the U.S. ranks 10th in recycling globally, ranking behind Austria (63%), Germany (62%) and others while generating 25% of the world's waste, notes Planet Aid. So it's clear there's room for improvement in the U.S. recycling system. A recent report from **As You Sow** and the Natural Resources Defense Council shows discarded food and beverage packaging that is not recycled amounts to an estimated \$11.4 billion in potential revenue annually.

## **Food And Beverage Companies Need The System To Work**

Food and beverage company professionals want to have their packaging recycled for many reasons, explains Pelz. Some use recycled content in their packaging and need a steady supply of recycled resources. Others make packaging that uses very high-quality materials that are highly desirable recyclables, such as Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)-certified pulp. Last year, Tetra Pak became one of FSC's largest multi-site certified suppliers by obtaining certification for 92 facilities worldwide, and sold 43.7 billion FSC-labeled cartons.

Also, "there's consumer demand for recyclable food packaging; consumers don't like throwing anything away," says Pelz. "But food and beverage companies count on the existing recycling system to work, and for consumers to actively participate in food packaging recycling."

This can be challenging, since recycling happens at the local level, and the U.S. doesn't have a uniform system. Instead, recycling programs are left up to individual communities to manage and fund.

Increasingly, food and beverage companies' teams are recognizing that local governments can't fix the system singlehandedly, especially given municipal budget constraints and limited jurisdictional boundaries, explains Pelz. For that reason, public-private partnerships are becoming a way to address opportunities to improve food packaging recycling where it happens: at the community level.

Championing best practices is a way to steer recovery and recycling rates in the right direction. Many food and beverage companies are already doing so through public-private partnerships that frame the waste reduction and recycling conversation in the context of economic value, waste reduction, the environment and jobs, and involve stakeholders along the value chain. One example is The Recycling Partnership, a nonprofit focused on increasing residential curbside recycling, which maximizes public-private partnerships to "make recycling easier for Americans" by increasing accessibility and efficiency.

Such collaboration has been ongoing in the carton industry since 2009, when Tetra Pak co-founded the Carton Council, a group of carton manufacturers united to boost America's carton recycling. As a result of their efforts, over 55% of U.S. households--63 million--now have access to carton recycling.

Corporate support for state policy tools to advance recycling at the local level is also growing thanks to public-private partnerships. The American Institute for Packaging and the Environment (AMERIPEN), founded in 2011, works to promote policies such as Pay-As-You-Throw waste collection fees and minimum recycling service level requirements.

But America Recycles Day is designed to remind businesses that there is more to do in the U.S. to advance recycling, and it's well worth the effort. Given our need to protect the environment and keep materials in the resource stream, the question to ask is not "should we be recycling?" but rather "how can we do it better and more effectively?"