

Recycling Myth Busters

By Sarah Pierpont, Deputy Director, New Mexico Recycling Coalition (NMRC) with input from an Article by Keefe Harrison at Resource Recycling

We've all heard someone we know say that they don't bother to recycle because they're sure it ends up in the landfill or that it takes more energy to recycle something than to start from scratch....well we're here to debunk these and other myths about recycling. Recyclables are recycled AND recycling does save energy. Read on to learn more.

MYTH 1. "My City doesn't actually recycle it. I'm sure it just gets thrown away"

Cities invest a lot of capital infrastructure in order to establish recycling programs with the understanding that recycling saves money. It saves money by saving valuable landfill space, avoiding landfill tipping fees, and creating a commodity that can be sold instead of simply tossed in the trash. It simply wouldn't make sense for a city to throw that valuable material away after working so hard to get it.

Still not convinced? According to the Can Manufacturers Institute, 105,800 cans are recycled in America every minute and nearly 75% of all aluminum ever produced is still in use today. The American Forest and Paper Association (AFPA) notes that the total paper recovery in the U.S. exceeded 51 million tons in 2012 and that paper recovery for recycling has exceeded 60 percent each year since 2009. Furthermore, the corrugated containers (cardboard) recovery rate was 91 percent in 2012, compared to 54.5 percent in 1993 (AFPA). The Steel Recycling Institute touts that in each of the past 50 years, more than 50 percent of the steel produced in this country has been recycled into new steel. Additionally, recycled steel has become the steel industry's single largest source of raw material because it is economically advantageous to recycle old steel into new steel. The National Association for PET Container Resources reports that PET plastic recycling in our country has hit 1.75 billion pounds a year.

What does this all mean? The figures noted above aren't simple little recycling thoughts, they demonstrate supply and demand at work. What's good about demand? Competitive prices are even more reason to keep our natural resources out of the landfill. And yet our recovery rates are still low. What's the biggest problem for recycling now? Say it together: supply. Bust this myth and it will help the supply come.

MYTH 2. "It takes more energy to recycle than just throwing stuff in the trash"

Many would-be recyclers are skeptical that after their recyclable material is rinsed, sorted, hauled, sorted, hauled again, ground, cleaned, reprocessed and then hauled yet again to be made into a new product that there's no way that it saves energy to recycle. It's a seemingly valid concern.

Fortunately, there are many resources noting the vast energy savings associated with recycling.

- A 2010 life cycle inventory showed for every pound of recycled PET plastic flake used instead of virgin, energy use is reduced by 84 percent, and GHG emissions are reduced by 71.1 percent (American Chemistry Council, the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers and the PET Resin Association).
- Recycling one ton of steel conserves 2,500 pounds of iron ore, 1,400 pounds of coal and 120 pounds of lime stone and all of the energy and resources it would have taken to extract that material.
- Creating a product from recycled aluminum takes 90% less energy than creating a product from virgin ore (Can Manufacturers Institute).
- One ton of recycled glass saves 21 gallons of gasoline, 3,000,000 BTU's of energy, 7.5 pounds of air pollutants from being released, and 2 cubic yards of landfill space (EPA).
- Recycling one ton of office paper saves 17 trees, 7,000 gallons of water, 80 gallon of gasoline, 3 cubic yards of landfill space, and 10,000,000 BTU's of energy (www.lessismore.org & EPA). Furthermore, manufacturing one ton of office paper using recycled paper stock can save 3,000 to 4,000 kilowatt hours versus making that amount using virgin materials (www.lessismore.org).
- When organic materials, such as paper, cardboard, food scraps and yard waste are sent to landfills, they decompose and generate methane, a potent greenhouse gas 21 times more dangerous than carbon monoxide.

The large savings of energy and reduction of GHGs noted above greatly offsets the energy needed to process the material.

MYTH 3. "Recycling is too expensive for my community"

It's too expensive for your community NOT to recycle.

According to a comprehensive 2010 NM Landfill Rate Analysis Report conducted by NMRC, New Mexicans buried \$168 million worth of valuable material in landfills instead of recycling it. Furthermore, the study found that, based on 29 reporting landfills in the state, the average cost to dispose of solid waste materials is \$31.29 per ton. Using that average rate, it is estimated New Mexicans spent \$51 million to bury \$168 million worth of recyclable material. **You read that correctly, in 2010 our state spent \$51 million dollars to bury \$168 million dollars worth of material!**

The recycling industry is a \$236 billion dollar industry compared to the \$45 billion waste industry according (EPA). That means the recycling industry is larger than the automotive industry!

Recycling also stimulates local economies by creating jobs. According to the EPA & the Institute for Local Self Reliance, there are 5-10 more jobs in recycling than landfilling. We all know that more local jobs equal more local spending.

In January 2013, NMRC completed another study that commissioned consultants (ICF International) to evaluate current jobs in NM and how many jobs would likely be created when we reach certain landmark recycling rates. Based on 2011 numbers, there were 3,526 direct, indirect and induced jobs in this industry in NM. It is estimated that of all the jobs created by recycling, 63% stay in the state with the remainder leaving the state. Upon reaching a 50% recycling rate, the state would see 5,000 direct jobs and a total of 8,000 new direct, indirect and induced jobs.

Getting a local recycling program going does have costs associated with it, but there are resources available. Did you know that every time you register your car, there is a \$.50 charge that funds tire recycling and general recycling activities? This supports New Mexico's Recycling and Illegal Dumping (RAID) grant administered through the New Mexico Environment Department. Communities can apply for funding to help offset recycling-related equipment and project expenses.

Your Part

Your part is simple, help bust these myths about recycling so New Mexico can bring in more recyclables. This means boosting the supply of recyclables, saving energy and natural resources and helping local economies, as well as ensuring a quality of life for future generations.

For state offices wishing to receive technical assistance on starting or expanding their recycling program, contact Tim Gray in the New Mexico Environment Department: Solid Waste Bureau Recycling Outreach section at 505-827-0129 or tim.gray@state.nm.us

Go to the NM Recycling Directory to find out what and where to recycle in your community:
www.recyclenewmexico.com