

Green Targets: Taking Charge of Recycling

By Ellen R. Delisio

The hodgepodge that is the U.S. recycling landscape is being overhauled by corporate groups needing reliable and plentiful sources of recycled materials.

“Recycling is very much alive and well in the U.S. because demand for the recycled materials has never been higher,” says Keefe Harrison, executive director of The Recycling Partnership, based in New Hampshire. “Recycling has a strong future with companies who are keeping an eye on material scarcity. We see a trend for companies to first shore up recycling within their four walls and then look outside their company buildings to assess how best they can improve community programs.”

NATIONAL RECYCLING TARGETS NEEDED

U.S. recycling rates lag behind those of most industrialized countries, largely because of a lack of uniform policies and limited, outdated infrastructure. There are no national recycling targets. For the most part, recycling is handled at the state level, with primary responsibility assumed by cities and municipalities, which often work in a vacuum.

“It’s fragmented,” says Paul Gardner, a recycling consultant. “There’s a lack of capital. There are cities next to each other with completely different ap-

proaches. There is a lack of recognition that recycling is part of another supply chain. There also are some places where garbage fees are very low, so people don’t care about recycling.”

REDUCE, RECOVER, RECYCLE OUR FOOD

American communities recycled and composted around 35 percent of municipal solid waste in 2013, diverting 87 metric tons to recovery, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The average American generates 4.4 pounds of trash per day, resulting in about 254 metric tons of trash across the United States each year, notes the EPA.

At the federal level, the EPA is increasingly concerned about the large amount of food in the country’s waste stream. “More food reaches landfills and incinerators than any other single material in our everyday trash,” says the EPA. In 2013 alone, Americans generated more than 37 metric tons of food waste, with only 5 percent diverted from landfills and incinerators for composting. At the retail and consumer levels, food loss and waste totals \$162 billion, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) estimates. “There’s great potential for all of us to help reduce, recover, and recycle wasted food,” according to an EPA spokesperson.

The EPA and USDA have set a goal of reducing food waste and loss by 50 percent by 2030. This domestic goal aligns with a similar target in the new United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals.

“As part of the effort, the federal government is working with charitable organizations, faith-based organizations, the private sector, and local, state, and tribal governments to reduce food loss and waste in order to improve overall food security and conserve our nation’s natural resources,” says the EPA.

LOCAL DIFFERENCES

Local recycling policies vary widely; 32 out of the 50 states require companies to take responsibility for discarded electronics, batteries, mobile phones, and other products. Legislators in the state of Rhode




Island recently introduced a bill that would require companies to recycle at least 80 percent of packaging by 2020.

"There are about 9,000 curbside recycling programs in the United States, which is good, but they are all different," says Conrad MacKerron, senior vice president of As You Sow, which uses shareholder advocacy and coalition building to encourage socially responsible behavior by corporations. The group has challenged Coca-Cola, PepsiCo, and Nestlé Waters to endorse higher recycling rates and adopt policies to meet them. "The collection rate for packaging is about 51 percent, and for bottles, cans, and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic, only about 30 percent is being recycled and there is great demand for it," says MacKerron. "We know that recycled aluminum cans are incredibly efficient, but 60 percent are just going into landfills."

While some companies support end-of-production recycling, many are reluctant to take on the total cost of disposing of items, notes MacKerron, especially if not all companies participate. "They want it to be fair," he says.

AGGRESSIVE RECYCLING POLICIES

Consumer interest in recycling is also high, because many people think it the most practical thing they can do for the environment, says MacKerron. "Often they are dismayed when they find out a lot of items put in bins could be recycled, but there is no market for it." As part of its work, As You Sow has drafted proposals for shareholders to present to companies asking them to adopt more aggressive recycling policies.

But some corporations, tired of waiting for changes at the government level, have begun to take action. "The last few years I've seen more attention by retailers and consumer brands to recycling than in the past 20 years," says Paul Gardner. 

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