

Is the Market for Recyclables Dead? Nope!

A long-time solid waste expert debunks eight myths about municipal recycling programs.

By [Marc J. Rogoff](#)



In recent months, there has been media attention directed on the “ills” of recycling in the U.S. in both the solid waste industry press as well as national reports published in mainstream publications as Fortune, Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post. Their common theme is that recycling has stalled and the situation is dire.

But is it really?

Industry executives have opined that prices for recyclable materials have fallen so far that it's oftentimes not economical to process recyclables and pay revenues to local communities. For those of us urging more recycling as a way of promoting sustainability, the question is: can community recycling programs survive?

Lighter packaging, dwindling demand for newsprint, and lower commodity prices have allowed some to argue that it is no longer profitable for industry to continue to provide recycling services without local governments subsidizing the cost of processing and

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marketing recyclables. So should we sound the death knell for recycling in the U.S.?

No. The solution is to confront the myths being painted on the state of recycling:

1. Recycling is not going away – it is now mainstream in most areas of the country, and is an essential public service like police, fire, and street lighting, and cannot be turned off and on with the cycles and swings of the recycling market.
2. Recycling often is not profitable in many years. Financial systems need to be developed to handle these economic realities through establishing “Rainy Day Funds” or Rate Stabilization Funds to continue to fund community programs when recycling markets are down.
3. Recycling should not be considered a free service. It takes money to send out the recycling truck. Perhaps more of the costs of recycling should be shifted to extended producer responsibility where some of the costs of recycling are included into the initial prices of the products themselves.
4. Change the “when in doubt, recycle it” philosophy. Consider bans of materials from recycling programs such as glass, plastic bags and polystyrene. These contribute to contamination problems and poorer commodity prices.
5. Recycling continues to be a challenge no different than when the first drop off facility and curbside program was developed. The Chinese “Green Fence” and lower commodity prices, light weights, and contamination stress the success of these programs.
6. It starts in the bin or cart. Communities need to continuously invest in recycling education. It is not a one-time thing. We all need to do a better job in educating our customers what materials can be recycled and what materials should be deposited in the garbage cart or disposed in special waste collection.
7. Recycling markets need to be developed in the United States. We have become so dependent on markets in Asia. We need to consider national legislation requiring a certain amount of recycled contents to be used in new products.
8. Make processing contracts equitable for all parties. Follow the guidance released by the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) and the National Waste and Recycling Association (NWRA) to develop mutually beneficial relationships that are cost-effective and produce high-quality service.

About the Author



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