

Undoing the Crisis created by Single Stream Recycling

By Tracy Frisch, Environment Committee Chair

Recycling can be a source of wealth and jobs and greatly reduces greenhouse gases.

When reuse or refusal isn't possible, recycling is a good way to avoid the use of virgin resources, whether from forests, minerals or petroleum. According to a Tellus Institute study, if the U.S. recycling rate reached 75 percent, recycling would reduce carbon emissions equivalent to removing 50 million cars from U.S. roads each year while also creating a net 2.3 million domestic jobs! But what will it take to get our society to achieve that goal?

At the January Membership meeting, at the request of the Environment Committee, Honest Weight Member-Owners voted to add Zero Waste language to our Co-op's Statements of Conscience. Since then, in response to EC recommendations, Honest Weight management has begun offering customers the option of buying coffee and soup in reusable mugs for in-store consumption in place of throwaway single-use cups. (Their lining with a thin plastic coating renders them un-recyclable.) Now you will get a discount at the cash register when you purchase hot coffee in a reusable mug.

These are significant actions toward changing customer habits and stopping the wasting of resources with single-use disposables, such as cups, containers and tableware (forks, spoons and knives). But looking at the bigger picture, I find that our ability to make progress toward Zero Waste at Honest Weight is constrained by the city of Albany's waste policies and services and inadequate local infrastructure for effective recycling and composting.

In this article, I consider the relationship between single-stream recycling and the untapped potential of recycling. And I ask the question: Does single-stream recycling help or hurt our efforts to move toward the goal of Zero Waste?

How much waste do we make and how much do we recycle?

The amount of waste generated per capita in the U.S. is on the rise. Each American now produces nearly 5 pounds of waste per day. That is 4.5 percent more than we produced in 2010.

According to the most recent EPA data, the nation's recycling rate has been hovering around only 35 percent of what's possible to recycle. That figure came out before China's recent decision to ban imports of certain types of recyclables. China established the ban to protect itself from the high levels of unrecyclable waste that imports of recyclables often contain. Since then, it's gotten much harder to unload recyclables from single-stream programs in the U.S.

Why is single-stream recycling so contaminated?

In a memorable statement in their article published in August 2018 by the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, "Single Stream Recycling: Explaining the Waste-Knot," Neil Seldman and Bob Gedert com-

Did you know that design for disposability has only been around for about 70 years? Prior to that time, few products were manufactured to be immediately discarded. Plastic shopping bags, excess packaging, and single-use cups, plates, and tableware are examples of disposability by design.

municate the problem beautifully: "Single-stream recycling has given households another garbage can, only this one is contaminated with recyclables that have to be recovered through ever more expensive MRF¹ technology." Single-stream recycling cannot function without expensive, dangerous² sorting facilities as an intermediary step.

Studies find that in dual³-stream recycling systems, people put an average of 2 or 3 percent non-recyclables in their recycling bins. With single-stream, the contamination rate rises to a whopping 15 to 27 percent! The sale of recyclables used to be a big source of revenue for recycling programs and brokers, but single-stream contamination has helped destroy that important income stream. I found widespread agreement on this point in the dozen diverse sources that I read as background for this article.

The lower cost of collection single-stream has been a big selling point for cities and towns, but cost savings have now been wiped out on the other end. Municipalities are being hit with steep new costs for sorting their excessively contaminated single-stream recyclables. Sierra Processing now charges the city of Albany \$400,000 a year for sorting its recyclables. (Did you know that Waste Connections, the third largest vertically integrated waste services corporation in the U.S., owns the Sierra processing plant in Albany, and that Honest Weight contracts with Republic Services, the second-largest waste corporation in the country, to take our recyclables there?)

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¹The abbreviation MRF stands for material recovery facility, the term for sorting plants where different types of co-mingled recyclables are separated for re-processing in smelters, paper mills, plastic plants and glass factories.

²The Times Union reported that last December a temp worker named Hendrik Werkman was killed at Sierra Processing in Albany after being pulled into a conveyor belt. (Sierra uses a temp agency called LeadPoint to employ temp workers for doing the most dangerous jobs there—hand-sorting materials rolling past them on conveyor belts.)

³Dual-stream programs collect paper and cardboard separately from metal cans and plastic and glass jugs, bottles and jars.

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Taking responsibility to stop wish-cycling

As a long-time Zero Waste enthusiast, it is not my intention to discourage anyone from recycling. Nor am I blaming you or others for mistakes that you may make in sorting your discards into recyclables, trash, and organics. But I do encourage you to take a few minutes to educate yourself about what is acceptable in each category. It's up to each of us to act responsibly.

Wish-cycling—the well-meaning act of putting things into recycling because you wish them to be recyclable—compounds the out-of-control problem of contamination in recyclables. Since wish-cycling undermines recycling, if uncertain that an item is recyclable, it is better to put it in the trash than to “recycle” something that could contaminate a load of recyclables. And dirty containers containing food, beverages, or other substances should never be put in recycling until they are cleaned. Empty them first and then rinse them out well.

We need to advocate an upstream solution...

Addressing waste with upstream solutions

In our throwaway consumer society, waste proliferates because we have not forced the industries that generate it to take legal responsibility for their mess. Waste is an externality. As with other types of pollution, taxpayers and residents have to bear the cost. If producers were made to be responsible, do you think they'd be so cavalier about generating excess packaging waste and other unnecessary trash? Or would they persist in manufacturing so many types of plastics, with all different capacities to be recycled, even though they are difficult or even impossible to tell apart? We need to advocate an upstream solution that would prevent anything that quickly turns into waste from being produced in the first place.

Purity gives recyclables their value

It's the purity of a load of recyclables that gives recyclables value for recycling. By purity I mean a bale of just clean newspaper or only of aluminum cans or nothing but clear number 2 plastic containers, such as milk jugs.

Why would a manufacturing facility accept glass for reprocessing when it's mixed up with plastics? What a mess! Similarly recycled paper mills can't deal well with loads of post consumer paper contaminated with glass shards, water bottles, and bits of metal. You get the picture.

Why did we fall for single-stream recycling and what is the fall-out?

Single-stream recycling was sold to residents and municipal governments as a cheaper, more convenient way of collecting recyclables. In their Waste Knot article, Seldman and Gedert explain how a couple of decades ago large waste corporations used the convenience and savings of collecting single-stream recycling as selling points to further consolidate their waste businesses.

While single-stream usually increases gross recycling rates at the collection end, that's meaningless if a smaller portion of recyclables actually gets reprocessed. Since the quality of materials collected is greatly inferior to dual-stream recycling, much more of the stuff collected ends up discarded as waste due to contamination, whether it's thrown away here or in countries in the Global South that import wealthier countries' recyclables. In the absence of hard data (municipalities don't get data from the far-flung countries where sorted loads of recyclables are sent to report to the EPA), we can credibly assume that not all single-stream recyclables get reprocessed, given the rampant problems with contamination.

As sorting costs for single-stream rise—and market opportunities to sell recyclables decline—some municipalities are deciding to send recyclables to a landfill or incinerator and to discontinue collection. Such was the case recently in Philadelphia, and in Fort Edward, NY.

Let's rethink our municipal recycling systems.

Rather than heaping blame on China for its embargo on contaminated recyclables, Seldman and Gedert characterize China's action as “a much needed wakeup call for cities and recyclers.” For them, it serves as the missing feedback we need to spur changes to our failing systems. Let's listen to that feedback and rethink our municipal recycling systems.

Seldman and Gedert report that big waste corporations blame the public for not recycling correctly. But in their view, single-stream is the cause for our confusion. Since recycling represents less than 10 percent of these waste service corporations' business and recycling is less profitable than waste disposal, these firms haven't felt the need to put more resources into educating their customers. Instead these waste corporations have led the race to the bottom, leading to poor quality, contaminated recyclables that cannot find a paying market.

Recyclables ... should not be construed as waste.

A first step in making change will be understanding recyclables as a resource, rather than as waste.

Seldman calls on communities to take back control of their recyclables. He doesn't think we will be able to turn the corner until we start understanding recyclables as the important resource and source of jobs and wealth that they could be. Indeed why are municipalities giving away their recyclables to large corporations whose mission is turning a profit by disposing of waste? The bottom line is that recyclables have value and should not be construed as waste. In the “Waste Knot” article Seldman offers guidance on how towns and cities can regain local control of their recyclables. From there, municipalities will be able to make better choices for residents, workers, and the planet. As the former president of the nonprofit Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, DC, Seldman is available to assist communities around the U.S.

Contact me for a list of pertinent articles available online. The Environment Committee welcomes your talent and energy, whether as a new committee member or an ally. I can also suggest a couple of ways that you can participate in organized Zero Waste efforts locally outside of the Co-op. Email me at tracy.frisch@gmail.com or call my landline, 518-692-8242.