

(Re)cycle of life

By Penny Musco

EACH WEEK, AS I set out my recycling, I wondered if I was doing everything right. Should I have washed out that last bit of mayonnaise? And what happens to this stuff anyway? More important, am I really making a difference?

In honor of Earth Day on April 22, I finally decided to find out.

The good news

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Americans generate about 250 million tons of trash yearly, recycling nearly 35 percent of it, up from less than 10 percent three decades ago. That saved more than 1 quadrillion units of energy (British thermal units), comparable to the power consumed by more than 10 million U.S. households in a year.

According to the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries:

- More than 65 percent of our paper is recycled, mostly here in North America, but also in more than 80 countries.
- Nearly 60 percent of U.S. aluminum consumption comes from domestically reclaimed aluminum.

- Around 80 percent of reprocessed glass is made into new bottles.
- 4.6 billion pounds of post-consumer plastic become other goods for the U.S. market; plastic scrap exporting is a \$930 million business.
- 2 million tons of textiles are repurposed each year into other materials for a variety of industries. Also, secondhand clothing is sent overseas.
- The approximately 100 million used tires recovered every year are used to make new tires, as well as things like playground surfaces, sidewalks, roofing tiles and flowerpots.

The bad news

Astonishingly, we in the United States still toss nearly two-thirds of our glass and about 87 percent of our plastics. The trend toward

individual plastic containers is part of the problem: The Plastic Disclosure Project, an organization dedicated to reducing the impact of plastics on the environment, claims that worldwide 38 billion plastic water bottles (labeled No. 1) end up in landfills annually. Numbers 3 through 7 pose another concern: They're often not collected in community programs because it's not cost-effective.

"Packaging is evolving at an enormously fast rate," says Costco member Michael Timpane, director of municipal recycling and diversion for Waste Management Inc., a leader in environmentally sound waste disposal and recycling, and the technology to deal with it is struggling to keep up.

Paper recovery also needs more attention, says recycling expert and consultant Richard Gertman, a Costco member. He notes that although it's the second-most-salvaged commodity, "national studies have found that of everything people are throwing away, more than 20 percent of it is paper that is recyclable."

The EPA estimates that food is now the single largest type of waste going to landfills, averaging 20 pounds per person a month. Discarded food produces methane, a greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change, according to the EPA.

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The Costco Connection

Costco and Costco.com offer a variety of recycling containers and composters, as well as products made from recycled materials, including landscape mulch, trash bags, office paper, cotton and paper towels, tissue, food and beverage items and more. Costco members can also bring their ink cartridges in for refilling at Costco Photo Centers, which saves money and keeps the cartridges out of landfills.

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What do I do with ...

Batteries and cellphones: Go to call2recycle.org/4-simple-steps-to-recycling-for-individuals for nearby locations that will recycle them.

Books: Operation Paperback (operationpaperback.org) sends gently used tomes to troops overseas and their kids stateside.

Compact fluorescent bulbs: Drop them off at home-improvement and hardware stores (and consider using LEDs instead—they're more environmentally friendly and easier to recycle).

Electronics: Sell them (buymytronics.com, gazelle.com, nextworth.com), or see if your retailer, state or the manufacturer has an e-waste program (electronicstakeback.com).

Food scraps: Learn more at epa.gov/waste/conserve/foodwaste/fd-reduce.htm.

Gardening containers: See if the store where you purchased them takes them back.

Hazardous waste: Contact your local collection facility to dispose of motor oil, paint and household chemicals.

Medications: Check disposemy meds.org, www.fda.gov/drugs, cdc.gov/needle disposal.

Packing peanuts: Visit loosefillpackaging.com.—PM

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What's a consumer to do?

The ultimate goal of recycling, experts agree, is to save energy, conserve resources and prevent pollution.

"It's not so much the bottle itself going to the landfill that is the problem," explains Gertman. "It's that somebody's got to make another bottle, and so we're going to need to extract more resources in order to replace that bottle that's thrown away, rather than reuse the resource of the bottle itself."

Waste Management's mantra is: "Recycle right. Recycle often." "Each citizen has a responsibility to their community and themselves to participate in recycling programs," says Timpane, "which includes getting the correct information to increase the volume and maintain the quality of our recyclables [meaning, for one thing, containers should be cleaned thoroughly]. It doesn't take much work, but it should give you a feeling of accomplishment because you're actually doing something important."

"It's the right thing to do." [H]

Freelance writer Penny Musco has stepped up her own recycling efforts.

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I can recycle that?!

MOST OF US know that Goodwill, the Salvation Army and similar organizations take used clothing and household goods (use thethriftshopper.com to find shops near you; get a receipt for tax purposes for any donations). But there are other places that reuse or repurpose just about anything, including these:

Animal shelters: Old linens
Earth911: The ultimate recycling resource; takes items

such as crayons, keys, golf balls, trophies, corks—and a whole lot more (search: earth911.com/?what=)

Freecycle.org: Your trash may be someone else's treasure.

Some grocery stores: Foam egg cartons; yogurt cups; butter tubs; deli containers; plastic shopping bags and those from newspapers and dry cleaners; wraps from bread, bathroom tissue, paper towels, etc.

Habitat for Humanity (habitat.org): Paint, tile, lumber, cabinets, fixtures

Terracycle.net: Transforms loads of used products into new ones.—PM