

"Zero waste is a philosophy and a design principle for the 21st Century; it is not simply about putting an end to landfilling. Aiming for zero waste is not an end-of-pipe solution. That is why it heralds fundamental change. Aiming for zero waste means designing products and packaging with reuse and recycling in mind. It means ending subsidies for wasting. It means closing the gap between landfill prices and their true costs. It means making manufacturers take responsibility for the entire lifecycle of their products and packaging. Zero waste efforts, just like recycling efforts before, will change the face of solid waste management in the future. Instead of managing wastes, we will manage resources and strive to eliminate waste."

- Institute for Local Self Reliance (Wash DC)

Zero Waste

A New Systems Approach Gaining Global Ground

by Marti Matsch

Recycling has become a national habit, a daily ritual practiced by over 100 million people every day. Yet recycling alone will not end our dependency on landfills and incinerators, nor reverse the rapid depletion of our natural resources. As world population and consumption continue to rise, it is clear that our one-way system of extracting virgin resources to make packaging and products that will later be buried or burned is not sustainable.

Zero Waste is a new way of looking at our waste stream. Instead of seeing used materials as garbage in need of disposal, discards are seen as valuable resources. A pile of "trash" represents jobs, financial opportunity, and raw material for new products.

Other countries around the world and some U.S. communities have begun to evaluate and redesign their current systems to encourage resource recovery and to create a more materials-efficient economy. American companies who do business overseas are already redesigning their products and manufacturing processes to meet the Zero Waste standards adopted by other countries. If they can do it there, they can do it here.

What is Zero Waste?

Redesigning Products and Packaging for Durability, Reuse and Recyclability

Instead of perpetuating our throw-away society, products would be designed using fewer material types that could be easily reused or repaired when they have outlived their usefulness.

Creating Jobs from Discards

Wasting materials in a landfill also wastes jobs that could be created if those resources were preserved. According to the new, ground-breaking report, *Wasting and Recycling in the United States 2000*, "On a per-ton basis, sorting and processing recyclables alone sustains ten times more jobs than landfilling or incineration."¹ According to the report, some recycling-based paper mills and recycled plastic product manufacturers employ 60 times more workers on a per-ton basis than do landfills. The report adds, "Each recycling step a community takes locally means more jobs, more business expenditures on supplies and services, and more money circulating in the local economy through spending and tax payments."²

Producer Responsibility

Zero Waste puts the responsibility for materials entering the waste stream on the front-end with the manufacturer, not on the consumer at the back-end of the product's life. The end result is that manufacturers redesign products to reduce material consumption and facilitate reuse, recycling and recovery.

"True Cost" Accounting

The price of a product does not currently reflect the full costs of the environmental degradation and public health impacts associated with the virgin resource extraction, processing, manufacture, transportation, and disposal of that product. When the market prices begin to include such costs, the more environmentally-friendly product will also be the less expensive.

Investing in Infrastructure, Not Landfills

In many communities, strategies like unit-based pricing for garbage collection (commonly known as Pay-As-You-Throw) have created tremendous incentives for residents and businesses to reduce waste and have resulted in higher landfill diversion rates. Rather than using the tax base to build new landfills or incinerators, communities have also invested in recycling, composting, and reuse facilities. In some cases, communities have created integrated discard "malls" where various recycling and reuse businesses coexist in a location where consumers can come to drop-off any unwanted item.

Ending Tax Payer Subsidies for Wasteful and Polluting Industries

Pollution, energy consumption and environmental destruction start at the point of virgin resource extraction and processing. Our tax dollars subsidize many industries that make products from virgin materials, such as timber and mining. Zero Waste proposes ending these federal subsidies to enable recycled and reused products to compete on an even playing field. Without the subsidies, the market can determine which are truly the less expensive products.

1. Brenda A. Platt and David Morris, *The Economic Benefits of Recycling* (Washington, DC: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, February 1993), p. 9. 2. Michael Lewis, *Recycling Economic Development through Scrap-Based Manufacturing* (Washington, DC: Institute for Local Self-Reliance, February, 1994).