

The Recycling Challenge

By Steven Rinaldi

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New Jersey's municipal and county recycling programs are facing a significant challenge that is undermining the success of our state's recycling efforts. This challenge has nothing to do with participation rates or fluctuating recyclable commodity prices, but rather with the troubling increase in non-recyclable trash that is mixed in with recyclable materials collected at the curb.

Non-recyclable trash that makes its way into recyclables includes everything from plastic shopping bags to garden hoses, polystyrene cups to plastic toys. Even plastic syringes, which pose a health threat to recycling center workers, have been found in recycling buckets.

Such contamination creates serious quality control issues and negatively affects the economics of recycling and is undoubtedly one of the biggest challenges facing recycling today.

The quality of recyclable materials put out at the curb has diminished over the past few years, especially since the onset of single-stream recycling. Single-stream recycling allows residents to mix recyclable bottles, cans and containers together with recyclable paper in one recycling bucket or cart. While single-stream systems typically result in improved participation rates due to their convenience, they also tend to result in more contamination.

In general, this problem is simply due to confusion about what can and cannot be recycled. According to research conducted by the Ad Council, only 52 percent of Americans say that they are "very" or "extremely" knowledgeable about how to properly recycle.

So, what is to be done?

The best way is also the easiest to implement: increased public education about what can and cannot be recycled. Continuous multi-faceted educational programs (including use of social media) will help make residents more aware of what should and should not be placed into their recycling container.

For example, many residents are clearly unaware that plastic bags don't belong in their single stream recycling containers. These bags jam up the processing equipment just like hair jams up the rollers on vacuum cleaners. Plastic bags should instead be recycled separately through programs established in supermarkets.

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection has produced a series of educational messages to promote recycling, including several that address the contamination problem, for use on municipal and county recycling program websites and social media sites. Please take advantage of these materials to increase recycling awareness. For further information on recycling, visit <http://www.nj.gov/dep/dshw/recycling/>.

New Jersey's municipal and county recycling programs have done an excellent job in getting residents to participate and recycle various materials through curbside collection programs. Many millions of tons of material are recycled annually thanks to these programs. These efforts not only save landfill space, conserve natural resources and save energy, but they also help strengthen the economy and create jobs.

DEP hopes to see even more material recycled in the years ahead, but also urges residents to clean up their recyclable material mix by being careful not to include non-recyclable items in with recyclable materials. The sooner we reduce contaminant levels in residential loads of recyclables, the better off we'll be.

Steven Rinaldi is a Research Scientist in the NJDEP's Bureau of Energy and Sustainability and has worked to advance recycling in New Jersey for the past 30 years. Steven has worked on all aspects of recycling, including legislative implementation, rulemaking, market and program development, grant management and education and promotion. Among other things, Steven coordinates the Department's New Jersey WasteWise Business Network, works closely with Sustainable Jersey on recycling issues and develops educational and promotional initiatives on behalf of recycling. Steven has a Master in City and Regional Planning Degree (with an Environmental Planning focus) from Rutgers University and a Bachelor of Arts Degree in History, also from Rutgers University.

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