

Waste Management is the largest residential recycler in North America – with 120 recycling facilities, including 49 single stream MRFs. Almost a decade ago, we began the deliberate transition to a “materials management” company – looking for ways to recycle and process more material to its highest and best use.

Waste Reduction – a success story

Lately there has been a lot of discussion about the “stagnant” recycling rate. Yet, per person waste generation in the U.S. is down by 8% since 2000, containers weigh 20% less than they did in 2000, and we generate 20% less paper than we did a decade ago. In many ways, we are successfully achieving the goals of the waste hierarchy by reducing waste, and we are probably recycling 10% more by volume than we have in the past, even though our recycling weight has not increased. As long as we measure success by weight, and as long as we only focus on end-of-life recycling we will miss the true potential meaning behind Sustainable Materials Management.

Challenges of Recycling

Certainly, recycling is not without its challenges. As we’ve moved to convenient cart-based single stream collection over the past fifteen years, we’ve seen a dramatic increase in the amount of material being recycled. However, we also see an increase in the amount of contamination in the recycling stream. Further complicating recycling logistics and economics in 2015 are ongoing changes to the waste stream—more plastic (and more types of plastics) and less paper. These trends result in increases in recycling processing costs and decreases to the overall value of a ton of recyclables. Unfortunately, commodity prices are down due to slower growth in China and low oil prices. The four-year trends toward higher cost and lower commodity revenue is not a recipe for sustainable recycling success.

Life Cycle Thinking – the challenge ahead

So, what is the solution? Recycling is a community value and a personal, individual value. To really hit the ball out of the park, we need to encourage local communities to embrace and make recycling part of their value system. We must also create financial incentives that cause individuals to pause when making a decision about which container to place their can or a bottle in when they are finished with it.

Policies should encourage “recycling with integrity.” This means true recycling - not “diversion for diversion sake.” The best way to do this is by embracing Life Cycle thinking – where we evaluate each material at a broader level to determine its optimal disposition. Instead of measuring success based on a percentage recycled, success should be awarded for GHG emissions reduced. This will reflect the goals of Lifecycle Thinking.

Finally, let’s celebrate our successes along the way rather than setting unrealistic goals that set us up for failure. Like many of the most important things in life, the highest levels of SMM success will take time and hard work. Setting realistic goals, with milestones along the way, will help us to maintain energy and community commitment for the long haul.

WM is working to reconcile these issue – we recognize the importance of getting the economic models right, improving the quality of recyclables collected and “recycling with integrity.” Importantly, we are committed to the concepts of LifeCycle Thinking – and on measuring success accordingly.