

Recent media reports have painted a confusing and misinformed picture of recycling, calling it wasteful, ineffective, and costly. Unfortunately, these articles completely overlook the positive economic impact of this activity on the U.S. economy. The reality is that recycling in the United States is a vibrant activity and a key driver in domestic and global manufacturing, supplying more than 130 million tons annually of scrap metals, paper, electronics, plastics, rubber, glass, and textiles for manufacture into new products. The business of recycling represents nearly \$106 billion in annual economic activity and is responsible for 471,587 direct and indirect U.S. jobs, generating more than \$4.3 billion in state and local revenues annually, and another \$6.76 billion in federal taxes.

The environmental impact of recycling cannot be ignored. The reality is that recycling is an important part of our national infrastructure, providing an effective and currently irreplaceable means of reducing landfill space and transforming end-of-life products and materials into valuable materials that are used to manufacture new products. Numerous independent studies have shown that recycling offers environmental benefits over landfilling and incineration. Among the most important are the reduction in energy use to manufacture with recycled feedstock (compared to using virgin material) and the very dramatic reduction in air pollutants, including greenhouse gas emissions, as a result of reduced energy usage. The U.S. EPA found that municipal recycling and composting in 2013 reduced carbon dioxide emissions by 186 million tons, comparable to annual emissions from more than 39 million passenger cars.

Yes, some segments of the recycling industry—particularly those that handle municipal recyclables—are currently experiencing unique challenges as a result of a changing business model and increasing quality concerns. In those segments, decreased commodity prices combined with efforts to make recycling more convenient for consumers have affected both the economics and the processing requirements for recyclables. However, it is important to recognize that the public and private entities involved with municipal recycling are taking proactive steps to address program funding and material quality to offset lower commodity prices. It is also important to put municipal recycling in perspective. Although it manages more than 80 million tons annually, this effort accounts for less than half of the total recycling activity occurring in the United States each year.

Unfortunately, by narrowly focusing on certain negative details while lumping everything else together, the media reports effectively discourage people from recycling altogether. This would be a major setback for U.S. residents and future generations, and it is why as an industry, organizations such as ISRI, Keep America Beautiful, and the Solid Waste Association of North America partner to showcase the enormous environmental and economic benefits of recycling. With America Recycles Day approaching on November 15, let's focus on what works, address the challenges, better engage the public on what to recycle, and develop the processes, technology, and markets needed to expand robust, sustainable recycling. Turning our backs on recycling altogether would significantly hurt the U.S. balance of trade, reduce jobs in the recycling industry, manufacturing that has come to rely on recyclables as a feedstock, the environment, and sustainable materials management. That would be a major step backward for our country and the health of the planet.

Robin K. Wiener  
President, Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries

Jennifer M. Jehn  
President and CEO, Keep America Beautiful

David Biderman  
Executive Director and CEO, Solid Waste Association of North America