

GREENWorks

Ideas for a Cleaner Environment

A publication of the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services, Concord, NH (603) 271-3710

December, 2008

Recycle This!

If you are reading this on paper, my hope is that you recycle it when finished. Recycling, after all, is more than the environmentally right thing to do, it saves you money on your local tax bill. Yes, our towns save money through recycling. In 2007, it cost New Hampshire towns and cities \$116 million to dispose of waste, yet every 1 percent increase in the recycling rate represents at least a savings of \$1 million!

Recent news reports, however, have indicated that there is no market for recyclables—these reports are wrong! Recyclables are still a valuable commodity, despite their lower market prices. We should not forget the environmental benefits of recycling vs. landfilling our wastes. With an average cost of \$75 per ton for disposal, not including transportation, the cost avoidance is still substantial and makes recycling still attractive. Recycling paper is particularly easy.

Did you know that almost 35 percent of the waste stream is paper and paper products? Yet nationally, we only recycle 51 percent of the available paper. In New Hampshire, only 19 percent of the available paper is recycled. The American Paper and Forest Products Association reports that at least 75 percent of all paper is recyclable, so both nationally and locally, we have a long way to go. Perhaps it's because many mistakenly believe that some paper like the glossy newspaper inserts or the envelopes with the little see-through windows are not recyclable. Basically, the rule of thumb for paper recycling is that if you can tear it, you can recycle it. Don't have paper recycling at work or school? Encourage your company or school to set up a recycling program and volunteer to help. Remember, it all benefits you and your community.

How about plastic? Only 23 percent of the plastic bottles made are recycled; the rest go into landfills, or worse. Plastic water and soda bottles save energy because they are so light and easy to transport, but every time we throw them away, we lose the oil that it took to make them. In a 2007 CNN survey of American beliefs about recycling it was discovered that as much as 72 percent of Americans didn't know that plastic is an oil-based product – around 10 percent of US oil consumption goes into making plastic. Additionally, 40 percent of those surveyed thought that plastic biodegrades, whether it's underground, in landfills, or, incredibly, out at sea. (By the way, it doesn't break down in the environment.) Plastic recycling is easy and your local transfer station is the best place for it.

Finally, you can compost your food waste. About 13 percent of the waste stream is food waste. Most of it, with the exception of meat, milk and eggs, can be composted. You can buy compost bins at most garden centers, which come with very good instructions on how to make a great soil amendment from waste food.

During August and September, the value of recyclables hit all-time record highs. Copper metal went to \$3.60 a pound and aluminum beverage cans topped out at \$1.05 per pound. Some grades of scrap steel were close to \$600 a ton. However, as the worldwide economy began to slow down, the markets for recyclables also collapsed. China, the primary market for paper, stopped buying scrap paper and began to work off inventories. The top five steel-making countries, India, Japan, China, Russia and Turkey also reduced purchases of scrap metal. While the value received from the sale of recyclables has been reduced, the spot market prices in late November and early December are more like those in 2006, before the run-up in the price of oil fueled speculation in other commodities. The price of recyclables, like other commodities, became inflated and have now simmered down to more sustainable levels.

Until the surplus inventory is worked down, certain items, such as scrap paper, will actually cost money to recycle. But now, as in past recessions, that will change. The bottom line, regardless of the economy, is that recycling is great for the environment, and it reduces the cost to your town for waste disposal, which saves you money on your taxes.