

A Lesson in Recycling



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In mid-September, I had the opportunity to attend IFAT ENTSORGA 2010, a world trade fair for water, sewage, waste and raw materials management, held in Munich, Germany.

At the event, President of the Federation of the German Waste, Water and Raw Materials Management Industry Peter Kurth said: "Waste is climbing the social circles."

According to Kurth, waste is increasingly being used as a resource—and not just as an energy resource—but as a substance that can be used for the production of other materials.

In the last two decades, Germany has made a significant effort in controlling greenhouse gas emissions by achieving reduction of about 25%. Additionally, the country has impressive waste management practices. Currently, recycling rates

exceed 60% and are expected to increase by 2% to 3% in the next two years alone.

Coincidentally, upon my return to the U.S., the CNBC Public Relations department sent me a preview copy of their latest documentary, "Trash Inc: The Secret Life of Garbage," featuring a report that takes an inside look at what happens to garbage after it is thrown out.

I am disappointed to say that waste management in the U.S. is a long way from perfect. Here are some staggering facts about waste and recycling in the U.S.:

- The U.S. makes 250 million tons of trash per year.
- Only about 2.5% of total waste is recycled.
- The average person creates 4.39 lb of trash per day and up to 56 tons of trash per year.

Unfortunately, there is no national law that requires recycling. Instead, recycling requirements are introduced by the state and local governments. Although most states offer voluntary programs and education to increase recycling efforts, only a number of states, including California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Oregon and Vermont, have passed laws for deposits or refund values on beverage containers or have certain recycling goals or landfill bans of recyclable materials. As a result, more than half of the garbage in the U.S. ends up in landfills.

While I risk coming off as a tree-hugging activist, I think that recycling on every level is very important and should be taken seriously. Recycling helps save energy and reduces CO₂ emissions; it helps protect vital environmental resources, such as groundwater; and furthermore, waste can be used to substitute raw materials.

The water industry already has started taking advantage of the environmental and economic benefits of wastewater reuse. Anaerobic digesters are being implemented for energy generation and the reduction of landfill gas emission into the atmosphere. Reuse of the digester waste streams results in freshwater reclamation as well as the production of high-value organic fertilizer (see this month's article titled "Cash Crop" on page 22).

Of course, recovering, recycling or reusing waste doesn't come cheap. New facilities and the upgrade of existing facilities require a considerable amount of finances, which is a constant concern. I am hopeful, however, that in the long run effective waste management will help recover profits and, better yet, protect the environment.



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