



How to Respond to Attacks on Recycling

Published Summer 2000 by the NRC

Introduction | A Five-Step Approach to Defend Recycling | Responses to 10 Common Anti-Recycling Arguments | 1. Recycling costs too much. | 2. Recycling should pay for itself. | 3. Recycling causes pollution. | 4. Recycling doesn't save trees or other natural resources. | 5. There is no landfill crisis. | 6. Landfills and incinerators are safe. | 7. If recycling makes sense, the free market will make it happen. | 8. There are no markets for recyclables. | 9. We are already recycling as much as we can. | 10. Recycling is a burden on families.

Introduction

Whether it's by national newspapers, network TV, or conservative think tanks, attacking recycling is a popular way to make headlines. But as recycling professionals know, the overwhelming majority of these attacks are based either on oversimplifications of complex environmental issues or on political philosophies out of step with mainstream America.

The sound bites are hard to beat: Recycling is a waste. There is no landfill crisis. Recycling doesn't save trees. These statements are both short and provocative—in other words, perfect for the news media. The idea of bashing recycling is so compelling that "the evils of recycling mania" is even used as an example of how to get publicity by being contrarian in Jay Levenson's popular "Guerilla Marketing" series.

As tempting as it is to draft a long letter with statistics and anecdotes to counter every negative point made about recycling, the reality is that long letters to the editor rarely get printed. So how can a recycling advocate respond?

With this fact sheet, the NRC recommends a five-part strategy to respond nationally and locally to attacks on recycling. Since most decisions about recycling programs are made at the local level, we suggest that you spend most of your energy responding locally, even to national attacks. We also offer some sound bites of our own in response to ten of the most frequent attacks on recycling. Use them in your letters to the editor, talking points for interviews with reporters, and speech notes for local leaders.

A Five-Step Approach to Defend Recycling

1. Respond to the Source.

Send letters to the editor for print pieces and to the producers for radio and TV spots. If you want your letter to be printed, it must be short and to the point. While letter lengths vary among publications, most are between 50 and 100 words. That's not much space, so stick to one or two key points. A well-crafted and focused letter is more likely to be printed than one that addresses too many points in too little space.

If you don't expect your letter to be printed and are writing to educate the editor or producer instead, suggest some positive story angles in addition to correcting inaccuracies in previous stories. Remember, anti-recycling messages make the news because they are contrarian or counterintuitive. Try to use this motivation to your advantage by coming up with a surprising twist or unique angle. Also think of ways that recycling could be related to other hot news stories (e.g., global warming, the economy, elections, etc.).

2. Give rebuttals to local opinion leaders.

Don't wait for the people who make decisions about your local recycling program to ask about the points made in an anti-recycling article. Supply them with brief responses to the main points in the article. Share anecdotes and statistics from your community program that show the benefits of recycling to your community. The longer you wait to provide positive information, the longer your decisionmakers have to wonder about the legitimacy of the negative articles. Prepare this material now so you can respond immediately after the next negative story appears.

3. Respond to copycat local critics.

Stories in major national newspapers (e.g., the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Chicago Tribune, and Wall Street Journal) are often reprinted in regional newspapers a day or two later. Local columnists often pick up national stories and write their own articles. For example, John Tierney's 1996 article in the New York Times Magazine is still quoted by writers four years later. Respond to the copycats by following steps #1 and #2.

4. Generate positive publicity for recycling.

To generate positive publicity, you have to get writers and editors interested in the story. Sending press releases to local writers and editors on a regular schedule is a common approach. New statistics, contests, freebies, events, awards, and links to national stories are all good ways to get media attention.

Send your press releases to specific people. When environmental articles or upbeat features on community activities appear in your paper, take note of the writers' names and add them to your mailing list. Staff writers can be reached at the publication. Freelance writers are often identified by the words "Special to (name of newspaper)" under their names. Newspapers will often provide contact information for their freelance writers.

5. Share what works.

If your letter to the editor gets printed or you convince a reporter to write a positive story, share your success with your peers through the NRC network.

Responses to 10 Common Anti-Recycling Arguments

When you write a letter to the editor or talk to a reporter, you rarely have the luxury of eloquently elaborating your points. Instead, you are required to fight sound bites with more sound bites. Many of the responses below will seem simplistic, but so are the anti-recycling messages they are meant to combat. The goal is to get your letter published and your points across—shorter letters and pithy answers have a much better chance of being printed than long, detailed ones.

If you do have the opportunity for a more lengthy response, we have provided good sources of additional information on the [links page](#).

1. Recycling costs too much.

- Well-run recycling programs cost less than landfills and incinerators.
- The more people recycle, the cheaper it gets.
- Recycling helps families save money, especially in communities with pay-as-you-throw programs.
- Recycling generates revenue to help pay for itself, while incineration and landfilling do not.

2. Recycling should pay for itself.

- Landfills and incinerators don't pay for themselves; in fact they cost more than recycling programs.

- Recycling creates more than one million U.S. jobs in recycled product manufacturing alone.¹
- Hundreds of companies, including Hewlett Packard, Bank of America, and the U.S. Postal Service, have saved millions of dollars through their recycling programs.
- Through recycling, the U.S. is saving enough energy to provide electricity for 9 million homes per year.²

3. Recycling causes pollution.

- Recycling results in a net reduction in ten major categories of air pollutants and eight major categories of water pollutants.³
- Manufacturing with recycled materials, with very few exceptions, saves energy and water and produces less air and water pollution than manufacturing with virgin materials.
- Recycling trucks often generate less pollution than garbage trucks because they do not idle as long at the curb. If you add recycling trucks, you should be able to subtract garbage trucks.⁴
- By 2005, recycling will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 48 million tons, the equivalent of the amount emitted by 36 million cars.¹

4. Recycling doesn't save trees or other natural resources.

- 94% of the natural resources America uses are non-renewable (up from 59% in 1900 and 88% in 1945). Recycling saves these non-renewable resources.¹
- With recycling, 20% more wood will need to be harvested by 2010 to keep up with demand. Without recycling, 80% more wood would need to be harvested.⁴
- 95% of our nation's virgin forests have been cut down and less than 20% of paper manufactured in the U.S. comes from tree farms.⁴

- It takes 95% less energy to recycle aluminum than it does to make it from raw materials.⁵ Making recycled steel saves 60%, recycled newspaper 40%, recycled plastics 70%, and recycled glass 40%. Landfilling never saves energy.⁴
- Recycling saves 3.6 times the amount of energy generated by incineration and 11 times the amount generated by methane recovery at a landfill.²
- Using scrap steel instead of virgin ore to make new steel takes 40% less water and creates 97% less mining waste.³
- Tree farms and reclaimed mines are not ecologically equivalent to natural forests and ecosystems. Recycling prevents habitat destruction, loss of biodiversity, and soil erosion associated with logging and mining.

5. There is no landfill crisis.

- Recycling's true value comes from preventing pollution and saving natural resources and energy, not landfill space.
- Recycling is largely responsible for averting the landfill crisis.
- Most states have less than twenty years of landfill capacity—who wants to live next to a new landfill?⁶
- The number of landfills is decreasing, while the cost to send waste to them is on the rise.⁶

6. Landfills and incinerators are safe.

- Landfills and incinerators can be major sources of pollution. For example, leachate from solid waste landfills is similar in composition to that of hazardous waste landfills.²
- About 1/4 of the sites on the Superfund list (the nation's most hazardous sites) are solid waste landfills.³

- Landfills are responsible for 36% of all methane emissions in the U.S., one of the most potent causes of global warming.²
- About 2/3 of operating landfills do not have liners to protect groundwater and drinking water sources.⁴
- Landfill owners only have to check for groundwater contamination for 30 years. What happens afterwards?

7. If recycling makes sense, the free market will make it happen.

- Government supports lots of services that the free market wouldn't provide, such as the delivery of running water, electricity, and mail to our homes.
- Unlike most public services, recycling does function within the market economy, and quite successfully.
- If the market were truly free, long-standing subsidies that favor virgin materials and landfills would not exist, and recycling could compete on a level playing field.

8. There are no markets for recyclables.

- Prices may fluctuate as they do for any commodity, but domestic and international markets exist for all materials collected in curbside recycling programs.
- Demand for recycled materials has never been greater. American manufacturers rely on recyclables to produce many of the products on your store shelves.
- By the year 2005, the value of materials collected for recycling will surpass \$5 billion per year.¹
- All new steel products contain recycled steel.⁷
- Over 1,400 products and 310 manufacturers use post-consumer plastics.⁸

- In 1999, recycled paper provided more than 37% of the raw material fiber needed by U.S. paper mills.⁹

9. We are already recycling as much as we can.

- The national recycling rate is 28%. U.S. EPA has set a goal of 35% and many communities are recycling 50% or more.³
- Many easily recycled materials are still thrown away. For example, 73% of glass containers, 77% of magazines, 66% of plastic soda and milk bottles, and 45% of newspapers are not recycled.³
- We are nowhere near our potential, especially if manufacturers make products easier to recycle.

10. Recycling is a burden on families.

- Recycling is so popular because the American public wants to do it.
- More people recycle than vote.¹⁰
- More than 20,000 curbside programs and drop-off centers for recycling are active today because Americans use and support them.³

Statistical sources: (1) Office of the Federal Environmental Executive, (2) Environmental Defense, (3) U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, (4) Natural Resources Defense Council, (5) Aluminum Association, (6) *Biocycle* Magazine, (7) Steel Recycling Institute, (8) American Plastics Council, (9) American Forest & Paper Association, (10) *Resource Recycling* Magazine.