

## Making recycling an American success story in challenging economic times

**By Ed Skernolis, Executive Director, Acting  
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WASHINGTON, DC - November 15 is America Recycles Day, a yearly celebration of the advances we are making toward an environmentally sustainable future. Across America, thousands of communities and businesses are raising awareness at special events and throughout local and national media to drive home the importance of recycling. This year, the day coincides with the election of a new President who has made clear his commitment to recycling and energy conservation. However, President-elect Obama and the new Congress, must fulfill that commitment in the face of daunting economic challenges. Recycling is not immune from recession forces – lower tax revenues for city services, a difficult investment climate for recycling infrastructure, and declines in commodity markets and prices for those very materials we most recycle – aluminum and steel, paper, plastic, and glass.

But there are reasons for optimism. As a nation we recycle about 34 percent of our municipal solid waste. This does not count the millions of tons recovered from used automobiles and appliances, construction and demolition sites, and myriad industrial wastes. These are good numbers, and we can and will do better. Here is why:

*The public is listening.* Our attention to global climate change has also renewed our attention to the energy-savings benefits of using recovered materials over virgin materials. Energy savings means fewer fossil fuels need to be burned to maintain our industrial society. Thus, every can, bottle, and newspaper placed in the recycling bin is lowering greenhouse gas emissions, an estimated couple of hundred million tons per year when all added up, or about the equivalent of taking 35 million cars off the road.

*Innovation abounds.* To compliment the public's renewed interest in recycling, recycling services need to be available and convenient. Both municipalities and private companies are using new education and management practices to maximize participation. We continue to modernize the collection and processing of recycled materials driving costs down and capturing more and higher quality materials to take to market.

*Businesses and institutions are tuned in.* Every responsible corporation knows that its business future depends on its ability to demonstrate the economic and environmental sustainability of its product or service. Whether packaging the soft drink or delivering the mail, paying attention to recycling means paying attention to the expectations of customers and their political leaders.

*Markets will recover.* Underlying the relative success of recycling over the past two decades has been the stability of commodity markets, which are essential to a predictable cost and revenue model for the communities and businesses that recover the materials to bring to market. In the past few weeks, however, our faith in that stability has been shaken. Prices for many recycled materials have plummeted. Some have argued

that this volatility in commodity prices is a reason for communities not to invest in a recycling program to help manage their waste streams. Hopefully, this short-sighted advice will be quickly dismissed by those who recognize that, whatever the length of the current economic difficulties, the world is not going back to the global markets of 10 or 20 years ago. Billions of people in the developing world have not given up their aspiration for a higher quality of life and the economic growth needed to achieve their dreams. As the economy recovers, those same nations that fueled the commodity markets these past 10 years will be back seeking the natural, renewable, and recovered resources to ensure the prosperity that their citizens are demanding. Recycling will be central to that accomplishment.

*Policy will be on our side.* Policymakers are again recognizing the many environmental and resource benefits of recycling. It is not an accident that climate change legislation in both Houses of Congress are specifically promoting recycling investment to help lower the energy costs of producing goods and services and to avoid the emissions associated with disposal.

We can continue to make recycling an American success story. It begins with each of us making the commitment to recycling in our everyday life. America Recycles Day is a good time to acknowledge the power we each have. *The act of recycling is an acknowledgement that millions and millions of small acts can add up and substantially change our world for the better.*

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