RECYCLING BUZZ TOPIC:
WHY DOES RECYCLING COST MONEY?

The fact that recycling is good for the economy and the environment is well-known. Recycling maximizes the use of resources we have already extracted from the earth. We all hear these themes when discussing recycling; however, there is also a cost for your local program. If these materials are worth money, why does it cost money to send them to the recycling center? Shouldn't it be free? It is commonly overlooked that recycling is a service that costs money. When recyclables and waste leave our curb, they are managed through the recycling system or the disposal system. For example, let us consider two different paths for a typical milk jug: recycling and landfilling.

RECYCLING

Consider the journey a typical milk jug takes in a single-stream (i.e., mixed recyclables) recycling program:

1. I rinse out my empty milk jug and place it in a recycling bin/cart.
2. A recycling hauler picks up my bin/cart and transports the recyclables to a single-stream Material Recovery Facility (MRF). A MRF is an engineered facility that is designed to do what is not being done at the curb: sort recyclable materials. In addition to the operating costs of machinery, maintenance, staff, and disposal costs required to manage non-recyclable items incorrectly placed in the recycling bin, a single-stream MRF can cost upwards of $11 million to construct.
3. At the MRF, my recyclable materials are sorted, baled, sold, and transported to secondary processors to be cleaned, or to end users to be repurposed in the manufacturing process.
4. My recycled high-density polyethylene milk jug can become lawn furniture, buckets, crates, automobile parts, and so much more.

LANDFILLING

What if I had decided to put the milk jug in my garbage?

1. I place my empty milk jug in a garbage bag/cart.
2. A waste hauler picks up my garbage and the waste is hauled to a landfill, where it is dumped and compacted in a landfill cell. A landfill is an engineered facility designed to contain waste. Construction of a landfill can cost approximately $500,000 per acre. Management of liquids and gas, maintenance, closure costs, and long-term monitoring are among some of the additional costs of a landfill.
3. My high-density polyethylene milk jug will take 500 years to decompose.

In both cases, a hauler must pick up and transfer your material to a facility with a large capital cost, whether it is a MRF or a landfill. At the end of step 2, the milk jug is either on its way to being recycled into a new product or on its way to slow decomposition.

Recycling costs money because the material must be hauled and managed before it can be used in new products. A service fee is paid to have your garbage picked up at the curb, transferred, and buried at a landfill. Similar to the costs of waste hauling, it also costs money to pick up, transfer, and process recyclables.

YOU CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE

- When you recycle, the costs necessary to transport and process the recyclables support the manufacturing of new materials.
- When you do not recycle, the recyclable items are buried in a landfill and must be managed as a waste for years to come.

IF RECYCLABLES HAVE VALUE, WHY DOESN'T THE VALUE COVER THE COST OF THE SERVICE?

The prices paid for recyclable materials fluctuate constantly. Consider how changes in oil prices affect the amount you pay for gas when you fill up your vehicle. The change in oil prices is also impacting the amount paid for recycled plastics. A well-run recycling program can generate revenue to help pay for itself; however, that revenue does not cover the entire cost and a service fee is needed. When markets are profitable, many recyclers will redirect this by lowering the service fee for recycling.

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