

# Recycling Online



## Myths and recycling – Part 1

by Roger Guttentag

myth-busting seeks to undermine the excuses that are often used to not recycle or to combat local misinformation that, for a variety of reasons, seems to crop up about how municipal recycling works or why it is needed.

### Paper versus electrons

I remember when the idea of using recycled content paper, especially for office products, was considered either economically foolish or a reckless decision. Some of this attitude was caused by the initial poor quality of a few recycled-content paper products. Mostly, however, it was due to the pervasiveness of myths regarding recycled content paper that can be attributable to our need to have excuses for not trying an unfamiliar product – as well as the hostility from those parties who viewed greater levels of recycled content as potentially harmful to their commercial interests. The Greenline Paper Company has a page on their website that summarizes very nicely the type of recycled paper myths that were prevalent and the responses to them.

Today, no one thinks twice about the value of paper recycling or of using recycled-content paper products. This, in turn, has led to an interesting evolution in the defense of paper product usage from competitive threats like electronic document systems or criticisms based on environmental concerns. Take, for example, the myth-busting sites of the Confederation of European Paper Industries and Two Sides North America, a group that represents companies in the paper and publishing industries.

Both organizations make two very similar arguments. The first argument is that paper is a sustainable industry because it is based on a product that is both renewable (grown) and achieves high recycling rates. The second and even more interesting argument is that virgin paper manufacturing is needed in order to sustain high paper recycling rates. It's interesting how times have changed.

### Clash of mythologies

Matters become really intriguing when two opposing sides engage in dueling myth-busting arguments as is now occurring over legislation to control retail plastic bags through bans or via methods such as bag fees. In these situations, it is not uncommon for one side to claim as fact what has been labeled as myth by the opposing side. The following examples are drawn from the myth-busting debate as presented by Californians Against Waste and Media Matters favoring legislative control of plastic bags in California and by the Bag the Ban campaign promoted by Novolex (a major U.S. based manufacturer of paper and plastic bags) and the Canadian Plastics Industry Association.

*Litter Source:* Plastic bag ban opponents point out the sacks constitute about 1 percent of the total litter stream, so these measures will have an insignificant impact on this problem while incurring major costs to consumers, they say. Ban backers, however, say litter audits conducted before and after plastic bag legislation show that the laws do reduce bag litter. In addition, they say focusing on weight obscures the fact that sack litter consists of billions of items, often in environmentally sensitive areas, such as waterways and coastlines.

*Environmental Impact:* Opponents say plastic bags require less energy to make than reusable or paper bags, can be reused for other purposes and are also recyclable. Ban backers like Media Matters quote reports showing that reusable bags, especially those made from plastic resins, result in lower energy use, waste, greenhouse gas emissions and water consumption even when taking into consideration single-use plastic bags being reused for other purposes (e.g. waste receptacle liners).

*Bag recycling:* Ban opponents argue consumer access to plastic bag recycling opportunities has expanded tremendously and, as a result, plastic film recycling rates have also gone up. The other side notes plastic bag recycling has gone up but is still a very small percentage of total product utilization. Most single-use plastic bags are disposed of,

Recycling, like any other human activity, is replete with its share of mistaken beliefs. These tend to fall into three categories:

- What happens to materials collected for recycling
- Which products are better or worse with regard to recycling or waste reduction
- The value of recycling as a preferred social goal

### No recycling fairy

One of the central challenges facing all municipal recycling programs is how to motivate and sustain participation. The usual approaches are based on using social marketing messages that link recycling to positive community values. However, a complementary strategy that many communities also employ is refuting common beliefs that could deter program participation.

Some examples of this type of recycling myth-busting can be found on the websites for the City of Denver; the City of Philadelphia; Kanawha County, West Virginia; and the West Central Solid Waste District, Indiana. These public education campaigns often address the following issues:

- Mistaken beliefs about what can be recycled or set out for collection
  - The idea that preserving landfill space is the principal reason for recycling
  - Whether recycling programs should be cost-free
  - The notion that materials collected for recycling are actually landfilled
  - The feeling that recycling rates are at their maximum levels
- In short, this form of recycling

they say, with a significant number still winding up as litter, which is costly to control.

One observation I have regarding this myth-busting debate is that the arguments raised by the backers of legislative action were extensively annotated with data sources while the same was not true for opponent arguments. While I cannot claim to be a neutral observer in this situation – I favor the bag ban arguments – it doesn't help that I am not provided an easy way to verify the claims made by the other side.

## Final thoughts

Myth-busting has its values, particularly when it comes to addressing beliefs about recycling and other waste reduction programs that have no factual basis. While it is true that the core mission of recycling public outreach should be the providing of correct information on how programs work, public knowledge about recycling can also have a dark side that is inhabited by misconceptions or even outright falsehoods that can be effectively dealt with through myth-busting.

However, myth-busting takes on a very different role when it comes to disputes over the right public policies to adopt. As

illustrated by the dueling myth-busting narratives presented by opposing sides in the debate over regulating single-use plastic retail bags, the starting point is often the same set of facts, but the two sides take those facts in different directions. Here, determining which myth-busting perspective is most credible requires a more nuanced look at what data is being used, or ignored, and how it should be interpreted. This becomes an even more critical task when the debate centers on the value of recycling as

social policy. I will delve into those waters next month.

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## Web Address Directory

All About Bags – Canadian Plastic Industries Association	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/BagMyths">http://tinyurl.com/BagMyths</a>
Bag the Ban – New York City Myths vs. Facts	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsNYC">http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsNYC</a>
Californians Against Waste – Plastic Ban Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsCA">http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsCA</a>
City of Denver – Recycling Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsCO">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsCO</a>
City of Philadelphia – Debunking Recycling Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsPA">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsPA</a>
Confederation of European Paper Industries – Myths and Realities	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsEU">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsEU</a>
Green Line Paper – Recycled Paper Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsPaper">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsPaper</a>
Media Matters – California Plastic Bag Ban Myths and Facts	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsCA1">http://tinyurl.com/BagMythsCA1</a>
Recycle Smart (Kanawha County, WV) – Recycling Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsWV">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsWV</a>
Two Side North America – Myths and Facts	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsNA">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsNA</a>
West Central Solid Waste District (IN) – Common Recycling Myths	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsIN">http://tinyurl.com/RecyclingMythsIN</a>