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Preserving the Environment and Improving Recycling Must Become a Joint Effort for Business, Government, Individuals and Nonprofits

By Keefe Harrison

With this week's Paris Climate Accord withdrawal, the federal government, which was the first entity to create environmental regulations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and the use of landfills, is now working to reverse course on these policies. While at the same time, the retail industry is committing to sustainable packaging goals and funding recycling operations. It's been a fascinating, troubling, and confusing year for those who watch environmental health and conservation issues closely.

Emotions aside, it is becoming increasingly apparent that preserving the environment is becoming the responsibility of everyone: the government, the public, nonprofits, and businesses. The tide is turning. Private individuals and business are now interested in taking a proactive role, and that's a good thing.

Recycling is among the many environmental issues that the government, the public, and business are working on together. It's easy to assume that recycling is everywhere however recent research shows that only 53 percent of the U.S. population has recycling automatically provided at their home. Of those homes, only 44 percent are served by recycling carts, which is the most effective way of recycling. This is a huge miss for the environment because recycling is one of the most efficient ways to reduce our country's greenhouse gas production.

It is encouraging to see businesses volunteering to financially support the improvement of recycling efforts in cities and towns across the country. More than 30 companies to date are behind The Recycling Partnership's work to improve recycling in more than 250 communities. What's more, innovative companies are creating and committing to their own sustainability goals. Last month, Target, The Recycling Partnership's first retail corporate partner, set sustainability goals, which, over the next five years include: sourcing its own brand paper-based packaging from sustainably managed forests, eliminated expanded polystyrene from its brand packaging, adding the How2Recycle label to its packaging, creating more demand for recycled packaging, and working through The Recycling Partnership to fund improved recycling operations and education in cities and towns across the country.

This is great news and we hope many more retailers will follow suite. Good recycling is not just turning used materials into new, reusable materials; it is about creating packaging from materials that can be recycled in the first place. Creating recyclable packaging is good for business and brand perception. Sustainable companies do not want to produce packaging that, if not recyclable, can easily end up becoming branded trash, reminding the public that their company is contributing to the landfill and litter problem. For this reason, packaging can be a brand asset or a brand liability. On the flip side, sustainable packaging ensures that papers, cans, boxes and containers are called back into duty, which is well aligned with American values.

When companies prioritize recycling, it enables them to become a part of the solution, rather than remain a part of the problem. There is a good deal of confusion in the public about the value of recycling as the process of recycling one item can, at times, be more expensive than throwing that same item away. The idea that recycling is most beneficial as a cost-saving measure is misleading. Recycling also has enormous economic benefits that can be identified on a large scale. These benefits include:

- Reducing greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.
- Preserving resources for future generations. Material scarcity is a concern to the global manufacturing sector.
- Creating new U.S. jobs in the recycling and manufacturing industries.

Retailers, like Target, are wise. They know their customers want to be proud of the products they buy and proud of the companies from which they purchase. In fact, 85 percent of U.S. adults are willing to switch brands to one that supports a cause they believe in. Companies also know that if there is a gap in federal concern and funding for environmental health, they can use their immense brand power as a force for good that will serve the earth, and their companies, well.

Keefe Harrison is the CEO of The Recycling Partnership, a national nonprofit organization that is transforming recycling in towns all across America. A 19-year veteran of the waste reduction and recycling field, her experience includes firms, governments, and organizations such as Booz Allen, NC Dept. of Environment, Association of Plastics Recyclers, Southeast Recycling Development Council, and Resource Recycling Systems. She is an active national speaker and published author on recycling and environmental issues.