



Background on The Trillionth Wasted Can

Forty years of trashing aluminum beverage cans

The aluminum beverage can was introduced in 1964, ushering in an era of rising disposable beverage container consumption, and unprecedented littering and waste. The Container Recycling Institute (CRI) estimates that between 1972—when the Aluminum Association began collecting sales and recycling data on cans—and the end of 2002, **961 billion cans** were wasted in the United States: landfilled, incinerated, or littered. At the current rate of about 50 billion wasted cans a year, this means that by the end of 2003, over one trillion cans—were wasted (*the 2003 statistics are to be released in late April 2004*). Another way of looking at it: 17.5 million tons of aluminum cans—with a current street value of over \$17 billion—now lie buried in American garbage dumps and landfills.

What are the public's misconceptions about recycling?

Evidence suggests that the public is misinformed about the state of recycling in America, especially about aluminum can recycling. There are two common misconceptions:

The first is an overestimate of container recycling—perhaps due to the prevalence of curbside recycling and the “recyclability” of aluminum cans. Many people are surprised at how low the national average recycling rates actually are: 20-30% for glass bottles, 21% for plastic bottles, and 48% for aluminum cans. They are also surprised to hear that these recycling rates have **declined, rather than increased**, in recent years. Finally, they are unaware that recycling rates in states that require a 5 or 10¢ deposit on beverage containers range from 70-95%, and that only ten states have these laws.

Another misconception is that recycling just isn't worth it, that it's a waste of time, a misguided liberal impulse to assuage consumer guilt, or that it uses more energy than it saves. Many people are disillusioned by periodic stories about glass being landfilled, for example (due to contamination resulting from co-mingled and single-stream curbside collection), and incorrectly deduce that recycling is a gimmick or a feel-good PR ploy. One of the most well-known—and disturbing—examples of this can be found in Michael Moore's “Stupid White Men.” Conservatives from the Cato Institute and elsewhere have also gotten into the act of “trashing” recycling.

Unless these misconceptions are countered, recycling rates will continue to slide.

About the Container Recycling Institute (CRI):

Founded in 1991, CRI is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization that studies beverage container sales and recycling trends, and promotes policies to reverse wasting. We provide technical information and analysis to students, activists, and policymakers seeking to increase recycling through a system of refundable deposits on beverage containers. Our support comes primarily from foundations, but we do receive some corporate support, as well as funding from individuals.



A dozen facts about aluminum can recycling and wasting:



In 2003, **52 billion** aluminum beverage cans were not recycled in the United States. That's **759,000 tons** of cans that were wasted: landfilled, burned in garbage incinerators, or littered.



The trillionth can wasted coincides with the **40th anniversary** of the aluminum beverage can.



The aluminum metal in one trillion wasted cans is enough to replace the world's entire commercial airline fleet **3.6 times**.



Packaging accounts for **24% of domestic aluminum net shipments**. Other uses include transportation (35%), construction (16%), durables (7%), electrical (7%), and equipment (6%).



For over four decades, the American aluminum and beverage industries have **failed** to achieve and sustain aluminum can recycling rates above **50%**.



Other countries do better. With a fully refundable deposit equivalent to \$0.10, Sweden's can recycling rate is 86%. Switzerland's is 91%, Brazil's is 87% and Japan's is 85%.



More importantly, aluminum can recycling in Europe, Australia, Japan, and South America is rising, whereas in the U.S. it is declining: it fell from a peak of **65%** in 1992 to **48%** in 2002.



The **social and environmental effects** of replacing discarded cans with new ones made from virgin materials are significant, including habitat and agricultural losses due to hydroelectric dams and infrastructure, toxic water pollution, emissions of greenhouse gasses and other toxics, etc. These damages are enumerated in the "Trashed Cans" report.



The aluminum industry repeatedly deceives the public by **inflating** published recycling rates by as much as 7 percentage points, and by presenting an image of their industry as environmentally-friendly because aluminum cans are "recyclable." **Recyclability** does not necessarily translate into recycling.



Public misconceptions are not limited to the average American. They extend to the **highest levels of the environmental community**. For example: prior to the release of "Trashed Cans," we contacted one of the country's foremost recycling experts for an endorsement. He commented that the aluminum can recycling rate was "around 65 or 70%," and quite "respectable." He was shocked to learn it was 50%, and wrote a powerful endorsement.



Social and economic factors responsible for the declining recycling rate include the public misconceptions described, increasing "away from home" consumption, and a stagnant scrap value for aluminum cans caused by the undervaluing of energy and raw materials.



Deposit laws or bottle bills can reverse bottle and can wasting, but industry **lobbyists** have blocked passage of container deposit laws in all but 10 U.S. states. At the state and national levels, lobbyists for the beverage, retail, and container manufacturing industries have spent millions of dollars fighting new deposit laws, and attempting to repeal existing ones.

Some ideas for graphic content:

Lined up end-to end, one trillion wasted cans

would stretch to the moon & back

158 times



Earth to Moon Distance	240,250 miles
1 mile=(5280 ft*12 in./ft) =	63,360 inches
Length of an aluminum can:	4.75 inches
Cans wasted, 1970-2003	1,013 billion
1 trillion * 4.75 inches =	4,811 billion inches of cans
=	75,923,397 miles
	158 Round trips to the moon

One trillion aluminum cans could encircle the Earth **3,048 times**



Earth's Circumference:	24,906 miles
1 mile=(5280 ft*12 in./ft) =	63,360 inches
Length of an aluminum can:	4.75 inches
Cans wasted, 1970-2003	1,013 billion (= 1.013 trillion)
1 trillion * 4.75 inches =	4,811 billion inches of cans
=	75,923,397 miles
75.9 million miles of cans ÷ 24,906 mi/Earth C=	3,048 Times around the Earth