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New Report on U.S Recycling Rates Reveals Poor 20-Year Track Record

Container Recycling Institute shows sales of disposable beverage containers have increased while recycling rates have stagnated

LOS ANGELES—October 30, 2013—The Container Recycling Institute (CRI) has just released its signature report on container recycling rates and trends in the United States. Based on more than two dozen data sources, from the beverage market to U.S. census tables, "Bottled Up: Beverage Container Recycling Stagnates (2000-2010)," shows that sales of disposable beverage containers have grown dramatically—up by 22 percent from 2000-2010—with per capita consumption soaring by 8 percent over the same period. Yet even as beverage sales increased, the rate at which we recycled the empty containers declined.

Of the 243 billion beverage packages sold in the U.S. in 2010—glass bottles, plastic bottles and aluminum cans as well as foil pouches, gabletop cartons and other nontraditional containers—153 billion were either landfilled, littered or incinerated. This put the national wasting rate for 2010 at 63 percent, a whopping 20 percent jump since 1990, when our non-recycling rate for containers stood at approximately 52 percent.

In other words, between 1990 and 2010—a period that saw almost feverish growth and investment in municipal recycling programs, education and infrastructure—Americans have persisted in wasting more beverage containers than they’ve recycled.

The report suggests numerous reasons for this imbalance, among them the surge in bottled water sales (up more than 400 percent since 2000) and sales of beverages consumed away from home.

“Recycling rates have stagnated in large part due to a dramatic increase in consumption of these beverages, especially at businesses and in public spaces where recycling bins are scarce,” said Susan V. Collins, president of the Container Recycling Institute. “Another key factor in the decline in recycling rates is the unwillingness of state legislatures to enact effective recycling policies, especially new or expanded container deposit laws.”

Our failure to recycle nearly two out of every three containers has monumental environmental impacts. As the report notes, every beverage container that is not recycled must instead be replaced with a new container made from virgin raw materials. Extracting and processing these materials requires far more energy—and generates more pollutants—than making containers from recycled feedstock.
For example, if the 153 billion containers wasted in 2010 had been diverted back to the manufacturing stream, the U.S. could have saved the equivalent of 203 trillion BTUs of energy—enough to power nearly all the homes in the cities of Los Angeles and Chicago combined.

This level of recycling would also have eliminated the release of 11.6 million tons of greenhouse gas (GHG) emission—that’s roughly one-fifth of total GHG represented by America’s municipal solid waste, and equivalent to taking nearly 2.3 million cars off the road.

“To realize meaningful energy savings and reduce the GHG emissions associated with beverage consumption, beverage container recycling must dramatically increase across the country,” added Collins. “As the report points out, minor percentage changes in recycling rates won’t cut it. If we are to adequately reduce the environmental consequences of extracting, processing, manufacturing and shipping billions of short-lived containers, national recycling rates for all major container materials must edge above 90 percent. And the only recycling method shown to achieve anywhere near that level of recovery is the refundable container deposit, an early form of extended producer responsibility.”

As the report shows, the 11 U.S. states with container deposit laws in 2010 consistently recycled 66 percent to 96 percent of the containers covered under their laws, whereas the average recycling rate for all beverage containers in non-deposit states was just 30 percent. Even though deposit states represent only 28 percent of the U.S. population, in 2010 they accounted for 46 percent of all containers recycled during that year.

“Bottled Up” notes that if even a modest deposit of five cents were placed on all disposable beverage containers sold in the U.S., a 75-percent recycling rate could be achieved across the board. The report also makes it clear that if American beverage consumption continues to follow current growth trends, we must do more to capture and recycle the billions of containers consumed away from home.

Finally, the report emphasizes that failing to recycle these containers has economic consequences as well as environmental ones. Between 2000 and 2010, for instance, the scrap value of our wasted beverage containers exceeded $22 billion. And that’s not counting the economic impact of tens of thousands of domestic jobs that, according to an earlier CRI report, would be generated by a national container deposit. The report can be downloaded at CRI’s website.

**About the Container Recycling Institute (CRI)**

Founded in 1991, the nonprofit Container Recycling Institute is a leading authority on the economic and environmental impacts of used beverage containers and other consumer-product packaging. Its mission is to make North America a global model for the collection and quality recycling of packaging materials. CRI produces authoritative research and education on policies and practices that increase recovery and reuse; maintains a database of information on containers and packaging; studies container and packaging reuse and recycling options, including deposit systems; and creates and sponsors national networks for mutual progress. CRI envisions a world where no material is wasted and the environment is protected. For more information on CRI, visit [www.container-recycling.org](http://www.container-recycling.org).

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