

## U.S. Wastes \$11.4 Billion a Year By Throwing Away Recyclables

Ronald D. White | July 18, 2012



In this June 20 photo, a heavy Caterpillar earth mover buries waste at the Clinton Landfill near Clinton, Ill. According to a new report released by the group As You Sow, the U.S. lags far behind other nations in recycling packaging materials.  
Seth Perlman / Associated Press / June 20, 2012

If you are dutifully separating your trash and filling up your blue bins every week, you are probably thinking that America can cross this whole recycling thing off its to-do list. That couldn't be more wrong, according to a new report that says that about \$11.4 billion in recyclable materials are still piling up in U.S. landfills every year.

The report's most controversial message is contained in its title, "Unfinished Business: The Case for Extended Producer Responsibility for Post-Consumer Packaging." Shifting more responsibility for recycling to the businesses that make the products would be the quickest way to reduce that waste, the report says.

The report was released by **As You Sow** in San Francisco, which describes itself as a nonprofit organization that promotes corporate responsibility through shareholder advocacy. Its report

found that the U.S. lags well behind world leaders in the percentage of recyclable packaging materials that are recaptured and reused.

"Denmark has an 84% packaging recycling rate, Belgium is at 78%, the Netherlands at 72%, Germany at 73%," the report said. "The U.S. recovery rate is estimated at 48.3% for packaging and 52.7% for paper and paperboard products."

Moreover, the report says that the nation's recycling programs have become less efficient. "Beverage container recycling rates have dropped 20% over the last two decades," it says. "One quarter of the U.S. population still doesn't have access to curbside recycling. More than 40 billion aluminum cans are still dumped annually into landfills in the U.S."

Some of the bigger implications come from the energy costs of producing new packaging products rather than recycling what has already been used. By one analysis, done by Resource Recycling magazine, the U.S. could save \$12 billion a year, or 168 million barrels of oil at \$75 a barrel, by capturing and using more recycled material.

"Aluminum is of special concern," said Conrad Mackerron, senior program director for **As You Sow**, "given the energy intensity needed to produce aluminum and the huge 95% energy and greenhouse-gas savings from making new cans out of used ones rather than from virgin materials."

The report adds that improving recycling rates may be beyond the resources of local government in times of widespread fiscal austerity. That's why it says the businesses that produce the packaging have to do more.

"Over 47 countries require producers to bear some or all of the cost of end-of-life packaging management that in the U.S. has always been paid for by taxpayers," the report said. "**As You Sow** believes it is time to shift financial responsibility for managing packaging to producers through effective and tested policies."