



Make It, Take It

When nobody owns their environmental impacts, everyone loses.

By Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

When I decided to dedicate my life to protecting the environment through groups like Riverkeeper, NRDC, and the Waterkeeper Alliance, I considered recycling a small and slightly boring part of the solution. But the products and packages we consume cause 44 percent of America's greenhouse gas emissions, according to EPA data analyzed by the Product Policy Institute. And the potential to adopt a rational, free market-based solution may provide the lowest cost bulwark against global warming with the highest potential for jobs generation and for quickly jump-starting American prosperity.

You see, America's waste issues are rooted mainly in America's irrational and rather un-American practice of subsidizing waste disposal. Riding happily on this gravy train of corporate socialism, most of the nation's top consumer product giants have so far refused to acknowledge their responsibility or expressed any willingness to pony up. They gleefully accept taxpayer willingness to fund the disposal of their waste and contribute lavishly to politicians who endorse this "free ride for polluters." They want to privatize the profits of waste, but socialize the costs.

When we subsidize waste, we penalize recycling and damage the environment. That is why America's recycling rate is often half of those of Europe and Canada. Today, most Americans want to recycle—yet well over 65 percent of our packaging materials still end up in taxpayer funded landfills and incinerators. This system is costly – adding to our governmental fiscal crisis. Subsidized waste disposal diminishes quality of life and is, frankly, un-American. Meantime, we throw away enormously valuable material—estimated at nearly \$11 billion per year by the shareholder advocacy organization [As You Sow](#).

When we throw away recyclables, we throw away jobs. Recycling creates 20 times the jobs that simple disposal does. If this country recycled 75 percent of its packaging waste by 2030, we could create 1.5 million new jobs, according to a report recently issued by the Blue-Green Alliance, a coalition of environmental and labor groups. American manufacturers—from paper mills to metals plants to plastic makers—urgently need more recyclable materials. Some have even closed plants, taking good jobs with them to foreign countries, because they can't find affordable feedstock

here. Their customers frequently shift to undemocratic nations with abysmal environmental and labor records.

The nations that lead the world in recycling have embraced a simple concept: extended producer responsibility, or EPR. Under EPR systems, brand owners are responsible for the end-use costs of packaging, instead of taxpayers and ratepayers. The brand owners then internalize the cost of recycling in their products and packages. Brands that reduce their packaging footprint save money. Those that don't are penalized. Materials are almost always collected at a lower per unit cost, as the producer-run organizations achieve efficiencies. EPR rewards the smartest entrepreneurs, inventors and designers. Smart companies make more money while serving the public interest. That's the way free market capitalism is supposed to work. And with public budgets shrinking in this country, the time for EPR has come.

To mobilize support for EPR, my colleagues and I have formed a new organization, Recycling Reinvented. Our simple objective is to ensure that America adopts EPR—that process begins when America's top brand-name companies take responsibility for their waste.

There are manufacturers who support our aims. But only a few responsible companies have stepped forward publicly. They include some of our nation's most prominent companies, including Nestle Waters North America, the continent's leading bottled water producer. Nestle is leading the charge with visionary and courageous leadership for industry-wide reform. And a handful of other companies, including Coca-Cola, have also worked to advance EPR. But nearly all the other top 25 brands have steadfastly refused.

Despite this resistance, the EPR train is gaining momentum and will not be stopped. We are optimistic that soon there will be simply too many CEO's who refuse to put their short-term profits and shortsighted strategy over their duty to our country and our children.

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