



Cleaning Up

Environmentally and Economically, Recycling Makes Sense

“IT’S A SUCCESS, IT REALLY IS,” SAID THOMAS WRAY, A RECYCLING WORKER at Allied Waste in Bellevue, Washington and a shop steward for Local 117 in Tukwila, in reference to recycling programs in his area. “Management told us themselves that there’s been a noticeable reduction in garbage because of how well we’ve been informing the public that recycling pays off.”

The trend is not just specific to the Seattle area. Across the United States, recycling is working. And because recycling works, thousands of Teamsters across the country are working as well.

That is the overall finding of The U.S. Recycling Economic Information (REI) Study, commissioned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and various states in cooperation with the National Recycling Coalition (NRC). According to the nationwide study, the recycling industry plays a vital role in boosting the U.S. economy through economic development and job creation.

The formation of the new Solid Waste, Recycling and Related Industries Division at the Teamsters allows for a greater focus on these and many other goals, priorities and concerns of workers in all waste-related industries.

Bob Morales, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 350 in Daly City, California, was appointed by General President Jim Hoffa to be the new Waste Division Director. Morales brings to the position years of expertise in organizing and bargaining contracts for Teamster members in sanitation and recycling. Morales is also a big believer in recycling and its economic and environmental upsides.

“Recycling is not only great for the environment, but it creates a wealth of new jobs because you have to hire additional people to sort and separate the waste,” Morales said. “These are jobs that are pretty clearly created exclusively by recycling.”

Important Industry

Ron Herrera, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 396 in Covina, California, and Terry Hancock, President of Local 731 in Burr Ridge, Illinois, join Morales as division leaders. Herrera was appointed Division Coordinator for the West while Hancock was named Division Coordinator for the Central region.

“I am confident that this team brings together the seriousness of purpose, long experience in bargaining, organizing and strong leadership skills necessary to launch new growth and initiatives in this important Teamster industry,” Hoffa said.

The Teamsters Union currently represents 30,000 members in solid waste alone, and the top two companies, Waste Management and Allied Waste, are among the largest Teamster employers. Morales will lead the fight to bring strong Teamster representation to the more than 150,000 sanitation workers who are not organized, as the trend to privatize the industry continues.

“Our mission is to make sure we organize all of the unorganized companies across the nation,” Morales said. “We plan to work to coordinate collective bargaining agreements with common expiration dates with multiple companies across the nation so we’ll have more bargaining power. Jobs in this industry are very secure because they cannot really be outsourced, so this will make us grow. It’s really just a matter of time.”

Economic Impact

According to the NRC, recycling creates 1.1 million jobs, generates \$37 billion in payrolls and produces \$236 billion in gross sales annually.

Recycling leads to the creation of new businesses to transport, sort and broker recovered materials. These jobs include chemists, dispatchers, material sorters, process engineers, sales representatives, brokers and truck drivers. Many of these positions are created in inner-city areas—where job creation is crucial—and typically pay higher than the average national wage.

The REI study also showed that recycling indirectly impacts 1.4 million additional workers, such as those employed at office supply companies and accounting firms, which are supported and supplied

by the recycling industry. These jobs were found to generate \$52 billion in payroll and \$173 billion in receipts. Recycling also adds value to materials, which can then be resold for a profit.

“Companies have already figured out recycling is big business and are making enormous collection and sales profits from the industry,” Morales said.

Since 80 percent of recycling profits go to federal and state governments, recycling also hugely benefits communities financially.

Hard Work

However, the individuals who work in the waste industry know it takes an enormous amount of time and effort to produce the gains recycling affords.

Workers at the TRI-CED recycling warehouse in Union City, California have been members of Local 70 in Oakland for approximately four years. The company collects 1,100 tons of recyclables from more than 60,000 homes in Union City and Hayward each month.

This is not an uncommon experience for industry workers across the nation.

“At every stop, we lift bundles that weigh a maximum of 65 pounds and maneuver 90 gallon totes that weigh up to 250 pounds, so there’s a lot of physical stress involved daily in this job,” Wray said. “You make one wrong move and there goes your back.”

Environmental Impact

Recycling is one of the most important environmental successes of the past century. According to the experts, recycling:

- Reduces air and water pollutants;
- Conserves natural resources, such as coal, iron ore, limestone, minerals, timber and water;
- Reduces the need for mining and logging;
- Prevents soil erosion; and
- Prevents habitat destruction.

Recycling also conserves landfill and incinerator space by reducing the need for it. In conjunction with composting, recycling redirected almost 70 million tons of material from incinerators and landfills in 2000. This was up from 34 million tons in 1990—a 36 million ton increase, doubling in only 10 years.

“These programs are really important,” said Larry Daugherty, a business agent for Local 350 in Daly City, California. “Whatever can be pulled out and recycled is good because it benefits the environment and, ultimately, we’re going to run out of landfill space. So, we need to try to reuse materials any way we can.”

Recycling saves energy as well. In 2000, recycling produced an energy savings equal to the amount of energy used in 6 million homes. By saving such a significant amount of energy, recycling also reduces our dependence on foreign oil.



Risky Business

Jobs in the industry can also be very unsafe. The fatality rates for sanitation workers during some years have been as much as 10 times higher than the overall national job fatality rate. In fact, waste collectors held one of the most dangerous jobs in the country from 1992 to 1997, according to the NRC.

“These workers are out driving in all types of weather, getting in and out of their trucks, dealing with traffic and other hazards,” said Wil Rance, a business agent in charge of the recycling branch at Local 117. “It’s a dangerous job.”

Waste companies also frequently pay workers by how much waste they collect as opposed to how many hours they work, which often results in them increasing their rate of work to an unsafe level. Accidents and injuries commonly follow, many of which are serious enough to permanently remove these workers from the work force.

“The only way you are guaranteed to have a decent working environment—inside or out of a facility—is if you have a union contract,” Hererra said, Deputy Director of the Solid Waste, Recycling and Related Industries Division. “The Teamsters help workers ensure they are working in sanitary and safe facilities, provided with protective clothing, paid well and allowed to take breaks. We want to raise the standards for safety and compensation and provide job security to whistle blowers who report violations. The only way for workers to have all of this is to be unionized.”

Union Advantage

Workers at Norcal Waste Systems in San Francisco already enjoy the benefits that come with being Teamster members, including a superior work environment.

“It is definitely a state of the art facility—especially in comparison to many nonunion facilities I’ve seen,” said Larry Daugherty, a business agent for Local 350. “It is fully automated. The materials are presorted by machinery and it all goes up on belts, which makes it much safer because the workers can see everything that

goes up instead of just reaching blindly into a pile.”

Teamster members working in the industry in Seattle have also witnessed improvements that have greatly enhanced their work lives.

“In the state of Washington, companies can work employees up to 14 hours per day,” Wray said. “Luckily, with our collective bargaining agreement, we have an article in our contract that says the company can work us the occasional 10 hours but anything after that must be put in writing. So, we know we can’t be over-used—and this is important because you feel the effects of 10-hour days, especially if they’re compounded over a week.”

Silencing the Critics

One of the biggest drawbacks of recycling, according to critics, is the expense. However, properly run recycling programs actually cost less to operate than incineration, landfilling and waste collection.

Many options are made available to communities in order to make their recycling programs more cost effective, including “pay as you throw” programs, maximizing recycling rates and adding incentives to waste management contracts that encourage disposal companies to recycle more and throw away less.

The more people recycle, the cheaper it gets. When a community reduces its waste stream, it also reduces its solid waste man-

agement costs and fosters the local economy.

With both private citizens and businesses jumping on the recycling bandwagon in increasing numbers, the industry is rapidly expanding. According to the EPA, more than a quarter of all municipal solid waste produced in the United States is recycled and the quantity of material that is collected for recycling continues to grow. Almost 9,000 counties and cities currently

operate programs for curbside recycling collection—a nine-fold increase in just a single decade.

“A lot of communities are just beginning or expanding their recycling programs,” Hererra said.

An Exciting Future

“It’s really taking off fast,” Morales said. “Garbage jobs are quickly turning into recycling jobs and electronic recycling is becoming a bigger part of the industry, which is going to make it even larger than it is today. States and cities across the country want to increase their recycling goals. Currently, California is the number one state in the country for recycling and San Francisco is up to 72 percent recycling with a mission to go higher and higher. It’s a big deal here in California—a state that is often ahead of the game—and other states will continue to follow suit.”

The recycling industry is not only growing in size, but it is also expanding in terms of the types of materials it encompasses.

“We’re already seeing things that used to be thrown in garbage cans being recycled,” Morales said. “For example, paint is being recycled to where you can use it over and over and, in the state of California, it is against the law to throw away batteries—they must be put in containers and recycled. They’re now also converting recycling into power. It’s a key industry and a lot of exciting things are going to happen.”