

Eight Great Myths of Recycling
PERC Policy Series, PS-287
Daniel K. Benjamin



Discussion Questions

1. On page 25, Benjamin says “Informed, voluntary recycling conserves resources and raises our wealth, enabling us to achieve valued ends that would otherwise be impossible. In sharp contrast, however, mandatory recycling programs, in which people are directly or indirectly compelled to do what they know is not sensible, routinely makes society worse off.”
 - a. How does Benjamin support his conclusion that mandatory recycling makes society worse off?
 - b. Why, according to Benjamin, should recycling be voluntary?
 - c. How, according to Benjamin, do popularly held “myths” about recycling contribute to the conflict between popular support for mandatory recycling and rational public policy?
2. Concerning several of the specific recycling myths discussed by Benjamin:
 - a. Why, according to Benjamin, does the amount of packaging used in the United States actually reduce rubbish?
 - b. Why, according to Benjamin, should states and communities permit free passage of trash across their borders?
 - c. Why, according to Benjamin, do we not squander valuable resources when we decline to recycle? Why, according to Benjamin, is it a myth that recycling saves resources?
 - d. Why, according to Benjamin, can recycling in some cases actually hurt the environment?
3. Would you support the resolution passed by the Carrboro Town Council in 1998. The resolution is reproduced on the following page.

TOWN OF CARRBORO NORTH CAROLINA

A Resolution Supporting The Creation Of A Zero Waste Plan, Resolution No. 11/98-99

Whereas, the placement of materials in waste disposal facilities, such as landfills and incinerators, causes damage to human health, wastes natural resources, and wrongly transfers liabilities to future generations; and,

Whereas, the elimination of specified types of waste for disposal, also known as disposal bans, will protect states from waste importation from other states and nations; and,

Whereas, consumers are currently forced to assume the high financial cost of collecting, recycling, and disposing of materials, and,

Whereas, tax subsidies for waste and virgin materials send the wrong economic signals to both consumers and producers; and,

Whereas, a resource recovery-based economy will create and sustain more productive and meaningful jobs; and,

Whereas, increasingly, U.S. and international governments and organizations are adopting the policy that the financial responsibility of collecting, recycling, and disposing of materials belongs with producers; and,

Whereas, producers should design products to ensure that they can be safely recycled back into the marketplace or nature; and,

Whereas, most types of waste streams can be eliminated through across-the-board minimum recycling content laws, the use of non-toxic alternatives in product design, and local composting facilities; and,

Whereas, recognizing that some presently non-recyclable materials are necessary for public health and national security, in which case, retrievable storage is the only safe alternative; and,

Whereas, recognizing that voluntary recycling goals have not, and in all probability cannot, achieve waste elimination; and,

Whereas, with the understanding that government is ultimately responsible for leading by example and establishing criteria needed to eliminate waste, so that manufacturers produce and businesses sell materials that can be safely recycled or composted.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED BY THE BOARD OF ALDERMEN OF THE TOWN OF CARRBORO:

Section 1. The Board of Aldermen supports the creation of a Zero Waste Plan in order to eliminate waste and pollution in the manufacture, use, storage, and recycling of materials.

Section 2. This resolution shall become effective upon adoption.

The foregoing resolution having been submitted to a vote, received the following vote and was duly adopted this 22nd day of September, 1998: