

By Chaz Miller

Garbage by the Numbers: 2003

Municipal solid waste generation has increased 168 percent since 1960.

MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE (MSW) is the stuff we have used and no longer need. The Washington-based U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) MSW data does not include construction and demolition debris or hazardous, medical, radioactive and industrial waste. Accordingly, this profile does not include those items.

EPA estimates the size of the waste stream by using manufacturing production data and estimates of imports, exports and product lifetimes. Food and yard waste is estimated based on sampling studies.

Compilations of state data using tonnage from disposal, recycling and composting facilities produce higher numbers. *Bicycle* magazine estimated 369.2 million tons of solid waste were generated in 2003. State data, however, often includes non-hazardous solid waste such as C&D and industrial waste.

The Alexandria, Va.-based Environmental Research and Education Foundation surveyed all disposal facilities in the United States and estimated that 545 million tons of waste were managed in 2000, of which 146 million tons was recycled or composted. That data covers all nonhazardous Subtitle D solid waste managed outside of the generator's facility.

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Sources:
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 "Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 1998 Update," U.S. EPA, Office of Solid Waste, 1999, www.epa.gov/osw
 Environmental Research and Education Foundation, www.erefdn.org
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Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) Facts:

Generated:

- 236.2 million tons
- 1,624 pounds (lbs.) per person per year
- 4.45 lbs. per person per day
- Corrugated boxes, yard trimmings, food waste and newspapers are the largest items in MSW before recycling.

Recycled:

- 72.3 million tons, for a 30.6 percent recycling rate (includes compost)
- 1.36 lbs. per person per day
- 497 lbs. per person per year
- Corrugated boxes, newspapers, office paper and glass bottles are the most recycled items by weight.
- Lead-acid batteries, newspapers, corrugated boxes and large appliances have the highest recycling rates.

Recycled Content:

- Aluminum cans, recycled paperboard, corrugated medium and glass bottles have high levels of recycled content.

Composted:

- 16.9 million tons of yard and food waste
- 7.1 percent composting rate for all MSW
- 56.3 percent composting rate for yard waste
- 2.7 percent rate for food waste

- 0.32 lbs. per person per day
- 116 lbs. per person per year

Incinerated or Landfilled:

- 163.9 million tons or 60.3 percent of MSW
- 3.09 lbs. per person per day
- 1,127 lbs. per person per year
- Food waste, yard waste, furniture and corrugated boxes are the largest items in the disposal stream.

Landfill Density (1997 data):

- 3.24 million cubic yards (cu. yds.) of MSW landfilled.
- Corrugated boxes, clothing/ footwear, yard waste and food waste occupy the most space in landfills.
- Aluminum cans and plastic bottles have the lowest landfill density.
- Glass bottles and food waste have the highest landfill density.
- An average lb. of trash has a landfill density of 739 lbs./cu. yd.

Source Reduction:

- Backyard composting, grasscycling and product lightweighting successfully reduce the waste stream.

End-Market Specifications:

- ISRI paper stock, ferrous, non-ferrous and plastic guidelines provide the specifications for individual recyclables.

MSW Tons Generated and Pounds Generated Per Person

