

Future of Recycling

Is a zero-waste society achievable?

Three-quarters of all Americans recycle at home, making recycling one of the nation's most popular environmental activities. Skeptics argue that recycling does little to help the environment and often costs more than burying waste in landfills, but rising energy prices and concerns about climate change are strengthening the supporters' case. Making new goods from scrap metal, glass or paper uses less energy and generates fewer greenhouse gases than extracting and processing virgin materials. Today the U.S. recycles more than 30 percent of its municipal solid waste, and advocates say that figure could be much higher. Diverting more waste from landfills, however, will involve finding ways to handle new materials such as food scraps. Meanwhile, a growing stream of junked computers, televisions and other electronic trash — much of it containing toxic materials — is forcing manufacturers to take responsibility for disposing of their products.



Four million old cell phones are recycled yearly at ReCellular, in Dexter, Mich. Used TVs, computers, cell phones and other "e-waste" contain many toxic materials and are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. municipal solid-waste stream.

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