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Fixing America's Waste Problem

by Nithin Coca on Friday, Aug 19th, 2016 CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

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America's massive, growing landfills are the result of many decades of bad policies and decisions. And it will take a concerted, society-wide effort to solve this problem. Let's dive deeper into just how big our landfill waste problem is and how we can begin to shift toward a circular economy.

This is not just about waste. Landfills are directly connected to the larger sustainability issues facing this country. One of the reasons that America went down the path of throw-it-away is related to the reason we decided to build vast suburbs instead of dense, sustainable, walkable cities. We have a lot of land compared to most other developed countries. The same space we used to build suburbs, roads and an auto-centric culture, we also used to hide our waste as we moved into a throw-away economy.

Today, we have 2,000 landfills and counting, with our collective waste growing by the day. What began as a simple solution to a changing economy grew into a massive problem. The average American produces an astounding 4.4 pounds of trash every day, according to EPA estimates. This chart from [SaveOnEnergy.com](#) shows how many tons of trash are in each state's landfill, per-person.



Landfills are also a source of greenhouse gas pollution, with a significant portion coming from methane, which happens to be 84 times more potent than carbon dioxide. This methane comes from the vast amounts of organic materials found in landfills, and much of it connected to another issue we cover often here at TriplePundit: [food waste](#).

Eliminating methane pollution has been cited as a key, short-term environmental goal if we are to achieve future climate goals. So far, little is being done across the country to limit landfill methane emissions. While capturing those emissions is key, it would be better to just eliminate organic waste from landfills altogether, by ensuring we eliminate food waste and compost the rest.

So, how can we get better? Perhaps we can look abroad, as other countries have lessons for America. [Germany achieves a recycling rate of 62 percent](#), far higher than our 34 percent, due to standardized laws across the country. They also have a high deposit on bottles – 25 euro cents for glass, which for a beer can sometimes be 50 percent of the cost – and a wide network of automated recycling machines that made getting this rebate simple. Other countries, like South Korea — which, due to its high population density and limited land-space, faces constraints on expanding landfills — have built infrastructure to make composting not only simple, but also effective across the nation.

We're seeing action like this on a smaller scale in U.S. states like California, where [recycling rates are higher](#) than the rest of the nation, and municipalities such as San Francisco have [implemented mandatory composting](#). But it's not enough.

In the end, what we need is a [circular, closed-loop economy](#), where all waste is reused or recycled and nearly nothing ends up in landfills. Building a circular economy won't be easy. In America, though, the greatest challenge may be inertia, as we overcome the burden of so many years of bad planning and limited infrastructure. Regional action is great, but we need a concerted, national effort to really stem the growth of all those landfills.

Image credit: Miller, Gary via Wikimedia Commons

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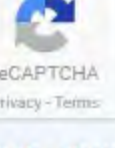
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