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Recycling Isn't a Waste. Dismissing Decades of Progress Is.

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Words matter. Headlines matter even more.

When *The Wall Street Journal* published Bjorn Lomborg's October 8 opinion piece, "Most Recycling Is a Waste," it delivered a provocative message that risks doing far more harm than the article's underlying economic arguments might suggest.

The problem isn't that Lomborg questions the economics of recycling certain materials. Those are legitimate questions, and ones the waste and recycling industry grapples with every day. The problem is the sweeping suggestion that recycling itself is largely a wasted effort.

That conclusion ignores decades of American progress, billions of dollars in economic activity and an industry that has become an essential supplier of raw materials to American manufacturers.

The numbers tell a very different story.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Americans recycled or composted just over 6% of municipal solid waste in 1960. By 1980, that figure had climbed to approximately 10%. By 1990, it reached 16%, and by 2000, nearly 29%. The recycling and composting rate later reached roughly 35%, before EPA reported 32.1% for 2018. That decline does not necessarily mean Americans recycled less: EPA said a revised food-waste measurement method increased the amount counted in the waste stream, changing the rate's denominator. Comparisons therefore require caution, but the long-term trend is clear: recycling and composting grew from just over 6% in 1960 to about one-third of the waste stream.

That is not a record of failure. It is evidence of an extraordinary transformation in how Americans manage discarded materials.

Consider paper and paperboard. In 1960, just 17% was recycled. By 2018, that figure had reached 68%. Lead-acid batteries achieved a remarkable 99% recycling rate. Aluminum, steel, cardboard and other recovered materials have become integral components of domestic manufacturing supply chains.

These aren't hypothetical environmental benefits. They represent millions of tons of valuable materials recovered and returned to productive use rather than buried in landfills.



And the benefits extend well beyond environmental stewardship.

The EPA's 2020 Recycling Economic Information Report estimated that recycling and reuse activities supported 681,000 American jobs, generated \$37.8 billion in wages and contributed \$5.5 billion in tax revenues, based on 2012 economic data.

Recycling isn't simply something Americans do to feel better about the environment. It is an economic activity that supports businesses, workers and communities across the country.

None of this means our recycling system is perfect.

Lomborg is right to raise questions about the economics of recycling materials for which viable end markets are limited. Some plastics remain particularly challenging. Contamination increases processing costs. Inconsistent local recycling rules confuse consumers. And collecting materials without sufficient demand for their reuse is not a sustainable business model.

But these challenges are arguments for improving recycling, not abandoning it.

No serious industry leader would suggest that every material should be recycled regardless of cost, market demand, or environmental benefit. Successful recycling depends on practical economics, effective collection and processing systems, technological innovation and manufacturers willing to purchase recovered materials.

The answer is to strengthen those systems, develop domestic end markets and make smarter decisions about which materials can be recovered efficiently.

Across the United States, waste and recycling companies are investing in sophisticated optical sorting technologies, automation, artificial intelligence and improved processing capabilities. Manufacturers are finding new opportunities to incorporate recycled materials into products. These innovations can help address the very shortcomings Lomborg identifies.

There is also a larger economic consideration that deserves greater attention: America's ability to recover and reuse materials domestically supports our manufacturing supply chains and reduces our dependence on newly extracted or imported raw materials.

At a time when economic competitiveness and supply chain resilience are national priorities, dismissing an industry that helps supply American manufacturers makes little sense.

But perhaps the most troubling aspect of Lomborg's argument is what happens when the public takes the headline at face value.

Recycling works only when people participate, communities invest and manufacturers have confidence in the availability and quality of recovered materials. A headline declaring that most

Collect
Recycle
Innovate



recycling is a waste can reinforce the mistaken belief that placing recyclable materials in the appropriate collection bin accomplishes nothing.

That perception has consequences.

When consumers lose confidence, participation can decline. When communities question the value of recycling, investments can stall. And when valuable materials are discarded instead of recovered, we lose both economic and environmental opportunities.

We should absolutely be honest with Americans about what can be recycled: all the paper, cardboard, plastic bottles and cans are a good place to start. We should also communicate what does not belong in the recycling bin. Not everything with a recycling symbol can or should be recycled. Attempting to recycle the wrong materials can make recycling more difficult and costly. We should be transparent about the limitations of our current infrastructure and realistic about the markets that support recovery. Public trust depends on that honesty.

But honesty also requires recognizing success.

Over the past six decades, Americans have helped build a recycling system that recovers over 80 millions of tons of materials annually, supports domestic industries and conserves valuable resources. We have made significant progress, and we have much more work to do. The waste & recycling industry has invested nearly \$10 billion in modernizing the recycling processing capacity in the US and Canada in the past decade. With stable secondary market prices for recovered materials and content commitments by brands and regulators recycling as a business can be one of the best returns on capital invested.

The choice isn't between recycling everything and recycling nothing. It is between continuing to improve a proven system or allowing an oversimplified narrative to undermine it.

Recycling is not a waste. Wasting valuable materials is.

And the greatest waste would be turning our backs on decades of progress just when innovation, investment and smarter markets offer the opportunity to accomplish so much more.