

# History of Waste

Do you ever think about where your garbage goes after the truck picks it up from the curb, or how we even ended up with the waste management system we have today? There's an interesting history to how we've dealt with waste in this country.

Street Sweeper - 1800's A century ago urban squalor and disease led citizen reformers to demand cities take action. They did. Cities became responsible for disposing of waste. But urban refuse was different then. It was mostly coal ash and food scraps, with a small proportion of simple manufactured products like paper and glass. Today, 71% of our waste is throw-away products and packaging, some containing toxic components. Garbage has changed, but our waste management system has not changed at the same rate.

The history outlined below has been excerpted from the Issue Brief [\*Unintended Consequences: Municipal Solid Waste Management and the Throwaway Society\*](#) [1].

## **Urban Health Challenges of the Early 1900's The Beginning: Urbanization & Public Health**

Historians associate the origin of the Municipal Solid Waste Management (MSWM) System with the urbanization that occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Crowding in industrial cities gave rise to repeated epidemics of contagious disease. Fear of these epidemics created political support for public investment in municipal sanitation infrastructure, first to provide clean water and sewerage and later, at the beginning of the 20th Century, to provide for the collection and disposal of municipal refuse.

## **Citizen Groups Demand Collection Services**

### **Ladies Health Protective Association - early photo**

Municipal refuse included not only household waste but massive quantities of manure and urine generated by horses and other animals in the city. Pressure from citizens' groups like the Ladies Health Protective Association in New York City and the Municipal Order League in Chicago compelled cities to replace the entrepreneurial "cart men" who provided refuse collection services with uniformed garbage collectors working for the city or for city contractors. Seattle archives 1915 horse drawn wagon with uniformed garbage collectors working for the city or for city contractors. By 1914 half of 150 cities surveyed were providing municipal refuse collection and by 1930 MSWM had been transformed into an institutionally organized, technology focused, municipally operated service.

## **Composition of Garbage Changes**

Changes in Waste Graph The key changes over the 20th Century are the dramatic reduction of inorganic wastes and the equally dramatic rise in product wastes. Inorganic wastes largely disappeared because coal ash is now treated as an industrial rather than a municipal waste. Product wastes, meanwhile, have increased more than tenfold over the course of the 20th Century, from 92 to 1,242 lbs/person/year in 2000.

## **New Products Create ?Crisis?**

As the 20th Century advanced, product waste presented unforeseen challenges to the MSWM system. Many products contained hazardous substances. MSW was typically disposed in local landfills that were little more than open dumps. Municipal landfills were frequently used for co-disposal of growing quantities of industrial process wastes as well as MSW. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, polluted, over-flowing municipal landfills began to be perceived by the public as a ?crisis.?

As they had done a century earlier, citizens demanded that their communities do something about waste. Citizen pressure and senior government mandates compelled thousands of local governments across North America to decommission local landfills and build or find new ones that adhered to design criteria intended to contain contaminants. Local governments also invested public resources in recycling programs that would reduce the flow of MSW to landfills and incinerators (the second component).

## **3D Green Chasing Arrows - Recycle Symbol**

### **Recycling Re-emerges**

Starting in the mid-1980s, local governments began ramping up public investments in collection programs for recycling intended to reduce the flow of waste to landfills and incinerators. Recycling was practiced throughout American history but was nearly abandoned with the advent of mass marketing in the 1950s and 1960s. Private industry ran scrap metal recycling operations as they had done for decades, while churches and other nonprofit organizations collected newspapers and aluminum cans. But it was not until the 1980s that municipal curbside collection programs became commonplace. Interestingly, municipal curbside was developed by the beverage industry as an alternative to deposits and quotas for refillable soft drink containers ? the first EPR programs in North America (see The Blue Box Conspiracy).

### **Waste Prevention Is Answer**

US EPA notes that per-capita waste generation has nearly doubled since 1960, from 2.7 to 4.41 pounds per day in 2003 and tells us that "[t]he most effective way to stop this trend is by preventing waste from being generated in the first place."

### **Looking for Solutions**

Despite municipal recycling, recycling rates have been stagnant since the mid-1990s and the amount of waste keeps growing. Local communities have been shouldering the burden of cleaning up after producers and consumers of wasteful products. By subsidizing wasteful product makers, we're providing *welfare for waste*.

**Pictured here: plastic bottle, camera, cups - all disposable**

## **Enabling the Throw-away Society**

The convenience of weekly waste collection masked the growth in resource consumption. The use of toxic components in everyday products that were thrown away introduced public risks from landfills and incinerators. Public costs were growing, while real incentives for producers and consumers to avoid waste were lacking. Even municipal recycling programs failed to achieve hoped-for results, because most products were not designed for recycling.

Local governments are struggling to keep up with the growing volumes of waste in their communities. Consider these figures from US EPA for 2007:

- **Since 1960 throw-away products and packaging waste has tripled** ? growing at more than twice the rate of population growth.
- Despite municipal recycling efforts, we are **sending more throw-away products and packaging to landfills and incinerators** today (122.9 million tons) than we did in 1990 (117.5 million tons).
- Nearly **three-quarters** of the waste we generate is throw-away products and packaging.

## **At A Crossroads**

We as a society are grappling with where to go and what to do with our waste management system. Consumers are becoming more aware of the quantity of waste every household generates, businesses are becoming aware of consumers' changing attitudes and behavior, local governments are trying to manage reduced budgets and increased waste, and the environmental community is discussing the next variations of the waste management system.

PPI asserts that Extended Producer Responsibility is the way of the future for our waste management system. EPR is a policy that ensures that those who design, market and use products and packaging are responsible for ensuring that these goods do not become environmental liabilities.

## **Resources**

- [A Short History of Waste](#) [2] By Helen Spiegelman. Product Policy Institute, March 2007
- [Unintended Consequences: Waste Management and the Throwaway Society](#) [1] By Helen Spiegelman and Bill Sheehan. Product Policy Institute, March 2005
- [The Next Frontier for Municipal Solid Waste](#) [3], Spiegelman and Sheehan, BioCycle, February 2006
- [Change in Waste Graphic](#) [4]\*\* (PPI)

*\*\* For turn of the century New York City, see Morse, W.F. 1908. The Collection and Disposal of Municipal Waste. The Municipal Journal and Engineer, New York, NY, USA. and Parsons, H. de B. 1906. The Disposal of Municipal Refuse, John*

Wiley & Co., New York, NY, USA. For 1960 on see US EPA data at <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/msw99.htm> [5] PPI's report, *Unintended Consequences*, used US EPA 2003. *Municipal Solid Waste in the United States: 2001 Facts and Figures*. The picture has not changed substantially since.  
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### **Links:**

- [1] [http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/PPI\\_Unintended\\_Consequences.pdf](http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/PPI_Unintended_Consequences.pdf)
- [2] [http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/Helen\\_Short\\_History\\_of\\_Waste\\_2007.ppt](http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/Helen_Short_History_of_Waste_2007.ppt)
- [3] [http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/Next\\_Frontier\\_for\\_MSW\\_BioCycle\\_Feb2006.pdf](http://www.productpolicy.org/ppi/attachments/Next_Frontier_for_MSW_BioCycle_Feb2006.pdf)
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- [5] <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/msw99.htm>