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Between Thanksgiving and New Year’s Day, Americans generate 25 percent more trash per day than they do during the rest of the year, resulting in about 1 million extra tons. This includes everything from food and decorations to gift wrap. While the winter holiday season brings good cheer, it also brings a lot more solid waste to the landfill.

While there are many reasons to cut down waste generation, the United States is in no danger of running out of landfill space. Over the last several years, solid waste generation has dropped considerably. It peaked in 2000 at 4.74 pounds per person per day and dropped to 4.38 pounds per person per day in 2012, a decrease of eight percent. Americans have recycled more, reducing the amount of waste going in the landfill. For example, in 1980, the U.S. population sent 89 percent of all solid waste to landfills, but just 54 percent in 2012.

Landfills have changed a great deal. After Congress passed the 1976 Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA), landfills were required to be lined with plastic or clay. Suddenly, landfills became much more expensive to design and operate. The law imposed deadlines for bringing landfills up to standards, including posting insurance guaranteeing that an operator could pay for cleanups even years after a landfill closed. Faced with that investment, many

Featured Interview

We’re not the only ones with garbage on the brain. Stephen J. Dubner of Freakonomics fame stopped by Marketplace to talk about paying for trash.

Featured Data

The EPA has a rundown of where pay-as-you-throw has caught on across the United States. Check out the free and interesting map and chart at this link.

Forum Reminder!!

The 2015 Emerging Issues Forum, 'Innovation Reconstructed', is coming up quick! Register here for this exciting event, scheduled for February 9-10, 2015!
communities closed their facilities. The private sector built mega-landfills with much greater capacity than the landfills that closed.

Trash now has to be shipped much farther to its final destination, and landfill deficits in particular geographic regions mean that not all states have years of capacity left. For example, Massachusetts has less than 15 years of capacity remaining even though they send most of their trash across state lines, whereas Arkansas has enough landfill capacity for more than 600 years.

What about North Carolina? What does our waste generation look like, and what's our landfill situation?

- First, the good news: North Carolina's per capita waste generation (including items that are later recycled) is much lower than the national average (.94 tons vs. 1.28 tons per capita per year respectively for 2008).
- Currently, North Carolina's landfill capacity is adequate. If North Carolina's rate of landfill use remains steady at approximately 7.8 million tons per year, the state has more than 20 years of landfill capacity remaining. Regions of the state, though, do have limited capacity.
- Because of landfill limitations and costs of disposal, North Carolina continues to ship the majority of its waste out of state, making it one of the top exporters of waste behind New York, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Ohio. From July 2013 to July 2014, North Carolina exported roughly 528,000 tons of waste (primarily to South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and Georgia) and imported only 192,000 tons of waste. States willing to accept trash shipments can reap an economic windfall. South Carolina, for example, has room for 130 million tons of waste; at the rate of $35 per ton, that’s a $4.5 billion economic development opportunity.

In the past several months, North Carolina's two largest urban areas - Raleigh and Charlotte - have considered a pay-as-you-throw solid waste program as one way to encourage greater recycling among residents. In this type of program, residential customers pay a fee for every incremental unit of waste that they throw away. Households thus face an economic incentive to reduce their waste disposal through source reduction, reuse, recycling, or
composting.

National experience shows that unit pricing can induce citizens to manage solid waste in a responsible manner. For Charlotte and Raleigh, controlling spiraling municipal solid waste (MSW) disposal costs, lengthening the life of overburdened landfills, and mitigating the need to site new and controversial disposal facilities are all reasons to consider this option. In addition, unit pricing is fair: households pay only for the MSW services they consume, rather than effectively subsidizing those who require more or receiving subsidies from those who require less. While any new system requires education, it remains to be seen if North Carolina’s largest cities follow the lead of cities in New England, where unit pricing has been successful for years. Nevertheless, as of 2006 (the last year data was available), 64 communities in North Carolina had some type of pay-as-you-throw solid waste system.

Municipal solid waste collection and disposal options are evaluated every year at budget time. Sooner or later, each municipality must face possible landfill capacity challenges and/or rising disposal costs. The question remains just how and when those challenges will be met.

Interested in more innovative concepts like pay-as-you-throw systems? Join leaders and learners from across North Carolina this February 9-10 at the 30th Annual Emerging Issues Forum: Innovation Reconstructed. Click here to register.

Diane Cherry
Environments Policy Manager
diane_cherry@ncsu.edu

What interests you about the natural and built environments in our state? Let us know, and it could
be a topic for a future IEI Environments newsletter.