

**Editorial Response**  
**Recycling Works**  
By John Frederick  
Executive Director  
Professional Recyclers of PA

More people in Pennsylvania recycle than vote. It is, far and away, the most common act of environmental stewardship performed by most people.

But recycling is a lot like eating well and exercising. The benefits are not immediately obvious and are sometimes questioned.

Pennsylvania's 10 million recyclers have come to believe that it makes sense to conserve resources and protect our environment by recycling rather than throwing materials into landfills.

Studies show that by transforming waste materials into useable resources, recycling provides several major benefits:

Recycling cuts pollution and conserves natural resources.

Recycling reduces energy use.

Recycling creates jobs and savings in manufacturing.

Well-designed recycling programs reduce solid waste collection and disposal costs.

Recycling reduces the need for more landfills.

The very success of recycling has led to periodic bashing based on several myths.

Myth #1. Landfills are the innocuous, inexpensive answer to our problem.

Though landfills may be the best available and affordable technology to dispose of things that cannot be recycled, they will forever be a liability to nearby communities. Beyond the odors and truck traffic generated today, methane (a potent greenhouse gas) and toxic liquid leachate will persist decades after the last bag of trash is accepted. We are leaving this legacy to future generations.

Myth #2. We're not running out of resources.

Metals, minerals, virgin forests, and the petroleum used to make plastics are all finite resources. The extraction of minerals and sand to make metals and glass also produces extraordinary amounts of waste rock and often impacts water quality in the process. Though a renewable resource, even the cutting of timber for paper pulp often contributes to soil erosion, stream sedimentation, and habitat degradation.

Metal and paper manufacturers have long used recovered commodities, conserving energy, reducing pollution, and saving money. Steel and aluminum mills use large quantities of recycled material. In the last decade, most new paper making capacity has utilized recycled fiber technologies.

Myth #3. That extra recycling collection is a waste of energy.

Since recycled materials have already been refined and processed once, manufacturing the second time around is a cleaner process and uses much less energy. In the United States, recycling saves enough energy to produce electricity for nine million households.

Myth #4. Recycling is expensive.

Curbside recycling service costs less than \$3.00 per month per household in some communities in Pennsylvania. It seldom costs more than waste collection and disposal.

But only looking at collection cost ignores one of recycling's unexpected benefits. Recycling is actually a positive economic force that adds value to a commodity rather than burying it for eternity.

The recycling industry in Pennsylvania employs 81,000 people with a \$2.9 billion payroll and is responsible for \$18 billion in sales and more than \$300 million in tax receipts. The recycling of more than 20 million tons of recyclable commodities has resulted in avoided disposal costs of at least \$800 million since widespread curbside recycling began in 1990.

Myth #5. There is plenty of space for landfills.

This may be true in a state as large as Pennsylvania but there is a bigger question. Is a landfill a desirable land use? Is it something that homeowners or communities are particularly enthralled to have near them? Is the additional truck traffic welcomed in most communities?

Myth #6. Recycling is a burden that has been forced on Americans by environmental extremists.

Not only is recycling extremely popular among Pennsylvanians, it has support from a wide spectrum of the political rainbow. When the Pennsylvania General Assembly approved continued funding for recycling in Pennsylvania last year, the bill received broad bipartisan support. The final votes in both chambers were unanimous.

Industry has embraced recycling and waste reduction with even greater enthusiasm. Most manufacturers have learned that less waste means more efficient operations in addition to lower disposal bills. Both have a positive impact on the bottom line.

Recycling has been good for Pennsylvania in many ways. But perhaps the most notable benefits have come with the attitudinal shift that it has brought about. Recycling has brought a fundamental change in the way people look at the waste they produce and the way industry uses resources.

It is the first major step in changing a society of ultra-consumers and waste producers into one of conservers and recyclers. Perhaps just as importantly, recycling has shown that sound environmental practices can actually bring economic benefits.

Something that's good for the planet and the bottom-line, what more could we ask for?

*John Frederick is Executive Director of the Professional Recyclers of Pennsylvania (PROP). PROP is the state's affiliate to the National Recycling Coalition and has 450 members from both the public and private sector. They are headquartered in Bellwood, PA and can be visited on the web at [www.proprecycles.org](http://www.proprecycles.org).*