



Written by [Michael Tennant](#) on June 2, 2022

Government Recycling Programs: Bad for the Economy and the Environment

Recycling bins are everywhere — but are they doing any good? Not according to [John Miltimore](#) of the Foundation for Economic Education. In fact, he argues that “abandoning recycling — at least in its current form — is likely to benefit both Americans and the environment.”

The recycling craze was largely the result of a single incident in 1987, in which the *Mobro*, a barge filled with garbage from New York, was prevented from unloading into landfills in various locations because of an unsubstantiated rumor that it was carrying toxic waste.



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According to a [Kite & Key Media video](#) that formed the basis for Miltimore’s article, “The *Mobro* had two big — and related — effects. First, the media reporting around it convinced Americans that we were running out of landfill space to dispose of our trash. And second, it convinced them that the solution was recycling — not least because Greenpeace hung a banner to that effect on the *Mobro* when it eventually had to bring the trash back to New York.”

Within a few years, cities across the country had established their own recycling programs, often coercing their citizens into participating in them.

In reality, however, landfill space was and is plentiful. America’s trash-disposal needs for the next millennium could be met by digging a landfill covering just 0.1 percent of the land used for grazing in this country, [researchers have estimated](#).

Meanwhile, “recycling is incredibly complicated,” wrote Miltimore. “While it makes sense to recycle some products, there’s [*sic*] also circumstances where recycling makes no sense at all.” Some items recycle fairly easily and cheaply. Others are not only difficult and expensive to recycle but have deleterious effects on the environment, particularly if one is concerned about the alleged threat of global warming, as so many recycling zealots are.

“Items like cardboard, paper, and metals (think aluminum) account for as much as 90 percent of greenhouse gas reduction from recycling, research shows, and they also make the most sense economically, since they are less expensive to recycle and offer more value,” explained Miltimore. Kite & Key Media also stumps for recycling electronics, which it says are not just “potentially toxic to put in a landfill ... but also packed with valuable metals and rare-earth elements.”

Plastic, on the other hand, is a nightmare to recycle, which is why very little of the plastic dropped into the world’s recycling bins actually gets converted into new products. “There are so many different varieties of plastic that they’re almost impossible to sort efficiently,” reports Kite & Key Media. “Most of it degrades with each reuse. Making new plastic is actually cheaper than recycling old plastic. And the newest, high-tech methods of recycling it generate carbon emissions 55 times higher than just putting it



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in a landfill.”

An even bigger environmental problem exacerbated by the recycling push is the [Great Pacific garbage patch](#), a massive, three-million-ton mass of debris in the Pacific Ocean, much of which consists of tiny plastic and wood-pulp fragments. Many of those fragments are there because for years U.S. cities shipped the recyclables they collected to China, which dumped a significant number of them in rivers, where they eventually washed into the ocean.

“We paid China to take our recycled trash. China used some and dumped the rest. All that washing, rinsing, and packaging of recyclables Americans were doing for decades — and much of it was simply being thrown into the water instead of into the ground,” penned Miltimore.

China finally stopped accepting these shipments in 2017, with the result that many American cities dropped their recycling programs. That, observed Miltimore, “was a first (and necessary) step toward improving the environment and coming to grips with a failed paradigm,” namely that the complex problem of what to do with garbage can be solved by dictates from central planners rather than by market forces.

“If Americans are serious about recycling to create a better future for humans, they’d get government out of the recycling business and make way for entrepreneurs armed with local knowledge and the profit motive,” Miltimore declared.

“Instead of seeing recyclables dumped into our rivers and oceans, we’d see them creating value,” he concluded. “That’s a win for humans and the planet.”



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