

What would happen if everyone recycled?

Date: 22 June 2017

Source: USA Today

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2017/06/22/what-would-happen-if-everyone-recycled/374773001/>

The world would look a lot different if everyone recycled. Most likely, it would be cleaner and make more use of available resources. Landfills would shrink tremendously. Recycling plants would be an epicenter of activity.

"As a society, if everyone recycled we will have moved from a linear 'take, make, waste' economy to one that is more circular by keeping materials in our economy and not allowing them to waste away in landfills," Brenda Pulley, senior vice president of recycling with Keep America Beautiful, wrote via email. "It would contribute enormous environmental, economic and social benefits across the country."

Here are a few ways the world might change if everyone recycled:

Plastic water bottles, aluminum cans and plastic bags would go a lot farther.

Keep America Beautiful compiled data to imagine what just one act of recycling by everyone in the U.S. might look like:

If everyone in America recycled just one plastic bottle, those materials could make more than 54 million T-shirts or about 6.5 million fleece jackets, according to Repreve data.

If everyone recycled one aluminum can, 295 million new aluminum cans could be made, according to Aluminum Association data. Also, everyone recycling just one can would reduce green house gas emissions equivalent to taking 6,750 passenger cars off the road and save energy equivalent to 80 thousand barrels of oil. Keep America Beautiful used the EPA WARM model to calculate energy estimates.

If everyone recycled one plastic bag, those materials could be reused in making 28,906 park benches or, according to Tex data, 144,530 16-foot composite deck boards. Right now, plastic bags must taken to a drop-off location for recycling and shouldn't be mixed in with other recyclables.

With so many substances flowing through recycling plants, new products would be created. Chaz Miller, director of policy/advocacy with National Waste and Recycling Association, said that extent of recycling would create "products you and I haven't dreamed about."

Everyone could save money.

The Bureau of International Recycling, a global recycling organization based in Belgium, believes recyclables should be recognized as the seventh most important resource, behind water, air, coal, oil, natural gas and minerals. BIR President Ranjit Baxi said recycling has not only environmental benefits, but also paramount economic ones.

"The recycling industry, whilst continuing to promote sustainability, is also projected to add about 850 billion USD to the global GDP by 2025," Baxi said in an email. "It is time that all global stakeholders [recognize] the huge carbon emission savings our industry continues to contribute."

Efficient recycling practices could save companies millions. In Apple's latest Environmental Responsibility Report, the company said it recovered more than a ton of gold from recycled devices — that's an estimated worth of \$40 million.

Recyclables would always go in the proper cans.

The greatest obstacle of recycling in America is contamination: People mixing recyclables and trash, unsure of the process. Here are current EPA guidelines on how to recycle.

"The chance that all of us would be perfect recyclers is pretty slim," Miller said. "For us to recycle everything implies that we've figured out a way to take all of the recyclables out of mixed garbage."

Everyone would have to know and abide by a streamlined recycling process.

The Great Pacific Garbage Patch, also known as the Pacific trash vortex, would be no more. (However big or small it is.)

Miller estimates the U.S. would need "a couple thousand" facilities to process materials, which could also effect the workforce. If the U.S. alone reached a recycling level of 75%, 1.5 million new jobs would become available, Recycle Across America reports.

There would still be waste.

"Waste is inevitable in any ecosystem," Miller said. "Every time you recycle something, there's a little bit of loss."

For example, Miller said paper fibers can only be recycled seven times. After that, the fibers are too small to use.