United States
Environmental Protection
Agency

Solid Waste and
Emergency Response
(OS-305)

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June 1992

Office of Solid Waste

EPA

Environmental Fact Sheet

Characterizing Municipal Solid Waste: Facts and Figures

EPA recently released the 1992 Update to its report "Characterization of Municipal Solid Waste in the United States." MSW refers to waste generated by commercial and household sources that is typically collected and disposed in municipal solid waste facilities. The report presents information from 1960 to 1990 on waste generation, disposal, combustion, and recovery through composting and recycling. This fact sheet highlights some of the report's key findings reflecting national approximations and projections.

The Current Picture

Recycling Makes Large Gains

In 1990, Americans generated 195 million tons of municipal solid waste, an eight percent increase over 1988. Of this total, 33 million tons were recovered for recycling or composting, representing a 17 percent recycling rate in 1990. This compares to a 13 percent rate in 1988. The amount of yard debris that was collected for composting increased dramatically, from 2 percent of yard debris in 1988 to 12 percent in 1990. The net result is that between 1985 and 1990, the amount of material recovered annually from MSW more than doubled, from 16.4 to 33.4 million tons. Two important factors in these improvements are the efforts of communities to compost yard trimmings and to set up recycling programs, and the efforts of manufacturers to use more recycled materials recovered from MSW.

Waste Generation Rates Also Rising

Despite this good news, Americans are still producing more garbage today than ever before. In 1988, U.S. households, commercial establishments, and institutions generated 180 million tons of MSW, or 4 pounds per person per day (ppd). In 1990, the per capita waste generation rate jumped to 4.3 ppd. So, although Americans recycled more, they also generated and threw away more: evidence that many opportunities for recycling and source reduction still exist. (Simply put, source reduction is waste prevention. It includes many actions that reduce the overall amount or toxicity of waste created.)

MSW Management After Recycling and Composting

In 1990, 16 percent of all MSW was managed by combustion, up from 14 percent in 1988. The amount of MSW landfilled is on the decline, from 73 percent in 1988 to 67 percent in 1990. The study projects an increase in combustion with energy recovery and a continued decrease in landfilling through the 1990s.

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