We are faced today with a conundrum. All around the country municipalities are being pitched the idea that recyclable materials that are combined with municipal solid waste can still be separated and reused. These programs are being sold with names such as “one-bin-for-all” or “advanced recycling.”

Communities are being told that such efforts will rely on facilities, commonly known as dirty MRFs, that offer a “revolutionary” new way to manage waste. Is that really the case?

Cue the Bard

“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” That was Shakespeare’s elegant way of saying that no matter how you term a situation, things are as they are. So instead of just accepting a name like “advanced recycling,” we should dig deeper and look at what’s actually occurring.

Some would suggest that the dirty MRF movement is advancing waste management. They say we have done all that can be accomplished with recycling in the U.S. and that it’s time to move on and find a better way of recovering materials.

Others think it brings a new form of alchemy to an approach that’s been used before.

A few things to ponder, however: Are dirty MRFs truly a new idea? Do they represent a step forward? Are their methods and outputs consistent with commonly accepted definitions of recycling? And are they likely to be irreparably harmful to core recycling industries, the communities they serve and the environment as a whole?

The Paper Recycling Coalition (PRC), which is made up of companies that manufacture 100 percent recycled paperboard and containerboard, believes the answers to those questions show this type of material processing is absolutely the wrong move forward.

The Coalition opposes these facilities because all industrial stakeholders, whether they are tied to recycling or not, need to have access to a reliable, safe and plentiful raw material base. Dirty MRFs threaten the recovered fiber supply due to organic and inorganic contamination, and it is the belief of the PRC that if a major industry’s supply is jeopardized by an unproven technology or approach, then that approach should not be pursued.

Guided by a definition

According to EPA, Americans generated 251 million tons of trash in 2012 and recycled and composted almost 87 million tons – equivalent to a 34.5 percent recycling rate. While the 87-million-ton figure is almost six times greater than the 15 million tons recycled in 1980, the sad fact is that Americans are also steadily increasing the amount of waste they generate per person – from 3.66 pounds per person per day in 1980 to 4.38 pounds per person today. This is nearly a 20 percent increase in per-capita generation.

We are generating more waste, which means it’s our duty to increase the recycling rate, at least proportionately to maintain past gains.

But first, let’s make sure we are clear about what we mean by the word “recycling.” The members of the PRC assert that neither incineration nor traditional disposal fall within the meaning of recycling. I would venture most members of the recycling community would subscribe to similar boundaries to define the term at the
center of our sector.

Surely, the public would feel duped if they knew their efforts to support the recycling of used products into new products were being eviscerated by dirty MRFs, which appear to send potentially valuable recyclables to landfills or incineration.

Recently, the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) engaged in a spirited (yet conclusive) discussion about the definition of recycling and ultimately arrived at the following: “Recycling is a series of activities by which material that has reached the end of its current use is processed into material utilized in the production of new products.”

Furthermore, in 1997, EPA offered a definition of recycling, which was adopted from an earlier NRC phrasing: Recycling is “the series of activities by which materials that are no longer useful to the generator are collected, sorted, processed and converted into raw materials and used in the production of new products.” You’ll notice this definition excludes the use of these materials as a fuel substitute or for energy production.

Since we have a pretty clear understanding as an industry on what recycling really means, we should be able to move forward in our efforts to increase the output from the agreed-upon set of activities.

A bigger economic picture

Dirty MRF processing proposals are spreading like wildfire across the U.S. and are being promoted by various interests as the answer to the future of recycling, often being framed as a magic elixir to communities facing severe budget constraints.

But when we talk about financial health, we must also consider the companies that create jobs and support the economies of the very municipalities looking for recycling answers. Industries such as paper manufacturing provide the markets needed to absorb the recyclable materials being generated in the U.S. In the recycled paper industry alone, tens of thousands of workers are employed in good-paying jobs that are meaningful economically and environmentally. Add to that the additional hundreds of thousands of jobs in sectors including aluminum, ferrous metals, glass and other components of the recycling infrastructure and the serious ramifications of this issue become apparent.

In addition, we are facing increasing challenges for clean fiber in order to meet the U.S. Food & Drug Administration standards for food contact packaging. Some mixed paper fiber generated by existing dirty MRFs has been so contaminated that it has been rejected. When the paper fiber is too contaminated, it may be shipped overseas. But simply exporting contaminated, devalued material deprives the domestic recycled paper market of its raw material. It also undermines the possibility of market participants (such as municipalities) from receiving any revenue for the material.

In short, adulterating recyclables to the point where local industrial consumers cannot use them in order to cut collection and disposal costs is not the solution. It’s easy to see how that formula will equate to deeper economic shortcomings.

Add kitty litter, lose value

It’s also important to remember that dirty MRFs are not a new idea.

The concept that all municipal solid waste can be combined with otherwise valuable recyclables, which are then separated and turned back into valuable commodities, turns our collective backs on the progress of the last 35 years. It would return us to the “throw everything in the garbage and hope for the best” era of waste management in the U.S.

In a recent meeting with industry experts working on this issue, my group was reminded that the paper recycling industry also opposed single-stream recycling, but that the paper sector ultimately adapted. Some individuals suggested paper interests could either accept the mixed-waste movement or accept that someone else will use the material. Our question in response: Who is that someone else?

The fact of the matter is that dirty MRFs are using similar technologies to single-stream material recovery facilities that have been around for decades. There is no major advancement that is setting current dirty MRFs apart. The only difference between the current dirty MRFs and their single-stream counterparts is that dirty MRFs start with unsorted material into which recyclables may be randomly interspersed.

Think about what goes into your neighbor’s trash every week. In addition to any recyclables, there may also be greasy chicken bones, diapers, kitty litter, household chemicals and dog waste. Compacting garbage with valuable recyclables, especially paper, in a collection truck will clearly make the vast majority of those recyclables unusable.

Parts of our industry are bound by FDA regulations governing the safety of our products to consumers, and we will not jeopardize the health and safety of our workers or consumers by exposure to a contaminated fiber supply. While some unknown but highly questionable material will survive the dirty MRF process, much will not and will end up in an incinerator or a landfill. This is certainly not what we have been working toward for the past 35 years.

Ready to work together?

America’s cities, towns and counties are at a crossroads, and they’re at the junction alongside the broader recycling community, the waste management business and the industries forming America’s recycling infrastructure. Should we embrace the pre-1980 technologies now re-branded as “multi-material processing facilities” that we know don’t work? Or should we continue on a path that we know is working, albeit not as fast or efficiently as we would all like?

There are no one-size-fits-all answers in life. We understand the economic pressures on communities. We need to do a better job of working together to resolve these problems. For the municipalities that may struggle to develop a balanced annual budget, simply reducing the number of trucks on the road seems like the first step to an answer. Let’s develop more practical solutions along those lines to help municipalities.

Let’s also remember that for the past four decades, consumers have been educated about the advantages of recycling. We know consumers view recycling as a very positive and personal way they can help the environment; they want to do their part. It makes little sense to tell residents their efforts are no longer needed.

The PRC stands ready to work with our municipal and recycling partners to achieve an economically sound collection and disposal system, but it must be one that also maximizes the quantity and quality of recyclable materials. RR

Fran McPoland is vice president at Colling, Swift and Hynes, a Washington, D.C.-based lobbying firm, which represents the 100 percent recycled paperboard and containerboard industry. She can be reached at mcpoland@collingswifthynes.com.

Reprinted with permission from Resource Recycling, P.O. Box 42270, Portland, OR 97242-0270; (503) 233-1305, (503) 233-1356 (fax); www.resource-recycling.com.