

by jackie gubeno

THROWN AWAY

A Georgia waste study reveals opportunities for public-private sector partnerships to recover recyclable commodities before they go to landfills.

Since the inception of the first municipal recycling programs, environmentalists have touted the ecological benefits of recycling. Recycling program managers have spent decades bouncing catch phrases like “sustainability” and the rallying cry of “reduce, reuse and recycle” off residents to try to encourage collection. However, reconciling the business end of recycling—the everyday dollars and cents—with the lofty, but sometimes more intangible environmental goals has proven to be a challenge faced by even the most enthusiastic of recycling coordinators.

Bringing business into the municipal recycling equation with a renewed effort is a new priority in the state of Georgia, thanks to the findings of the *Georgia State-wide Waste Characterization Study*. The two-year study, released in the summer of 2005 by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and R.W. Beck, examined solid waste and recycling practices in the state and took a close look at what Georgians were throwing away.

The study revealed that nearly 2.6 million tons—or ap-

proximately 40 percent—of the municipal solid waste (MSW) Georgians throw away per year are recyclable materials with existing end markets within the state. The findings provided a wake-up call to municipal recycling program coordinators as well as to the businesses those programs have the potential to feed.

JUST THE FACTS. When the state of Georgia failed to meet its 1996 25-percent waste reduction goal by the deadline, officials wanted to know why. In spite of increased recycling efforts throughout the '90s, the state saw its waste reduction goals slipping further and further away, according to Randy Hartmann, office director of the environmental management office of the DCA. “Our per capita disposal rate has been moving steadily away



from that ever since the goal was enacted," he says. "We wanted to delve into that and find out why we weren't meeting our goals."

What the study found was millions of tons of commodities that could be reused by Georgia industries were winding up in landfills. For example, the study found that approximately 1.9 million tons of



paper products that wound up in the state's landfills in 2004 could have been recycled and used by companies operating in Georgia. In fact, nine of the state's 15 paper mills rely exclusively on recycled material, which makes the market for recovered fiber particularly strong.

That Georgians were throwing away valuable recyclables was really no surprise in itself, but the staggering amount shocked a fair number of people in the private and public sectors.

"As a state, we thought we were throwing away a lot of these materials, but we had no idea of the magnitude until we did this study," says Hartmann.

"We were shocked at the amount of ONP [old newspapers] going into Georgia landfills," says Lisa White of SP Newsprint Co., an Atlanta-based newsprint producer that uses more than 800,000 tons of ONP per year at its Dublin, Ga., mill. "We thought we were recovering a higher number—it was glaring for us."

The actual tonnage figures also surprised Gloria Hardegree, director of the Georgia Recycling Coalition,

especially when the market value of those commodities was considered. "That's \$250 million worth of materials going into landfills," she says.

Based on 2004 data, the study revealed that old corrugated containers (OCC) made up the largest portion of recyclable materials in the state's landfills at approximately 733,900 tons, or 11 percent. Plastic film came in third place, accounting for about 7.4 percent of the total tons of MSW, followed by ONP at about 4.8 percent. Miscellaneous rigid plastics made up approximately 4.4 percent, and textiles made up 4 percent.

Armed with this data, the DCA and affiliated organizations like the Georgia Recycling Coalition and the regional Southeast Recycling Development Council (SERDC) are poised to bring the economic issue to the forefront of municipal recycling.

WAKE-UP CALL. The study has provided a foundation for raising awareness of the amount of material available in Georgia and the in-state markets that can consume it, says Hartmann. Prior to the study, "that awareness was just not out there," he says. "The strength of our Georgia [recycled commodity] markets was actually one of the worst secrets we could have kept in the state."

The study highlights two important aspects of a successful recycling equation—first, that there are plenty of commodities out there that private businesses can obtain within the state instead of having to look elsewhere and pay to bring the material in from other states. With high fuel costs a fixture in today's marketplace, such savings on transportation costs could have a big impact on the bottom lines of Georgia's businesses, says SP Newsprint's White. "Every ton we can get out of Georgia is better for us," she says. "That's a ton we don't have to get from somewhere else."

For the municipal programs themselves, the study shows that there are viable markets within the state and that taking advantage of those markets can help fund programs. "Our



paper industry can use every pound of this material," says Hartmann.

Part of the educational campaign that has been launched in the state has been a series of tours of Georgia paper mills. Three tours have been conducted so far, and attendance has tripled from about 30 people at the first tour of SP Recycling's Dublin, Ga., mill to more than 100 attending the latest tour of Pratt Industries' facility in Conyers, Ga., in mid-June.

The tours provide an educational opportunity as well as chance for attendees, who typically include state and local officials, legislators, recycling program managers and solid waste directors, to see the workings of a paper mill firsthand. "These events help make everyone aware that all of these commodities can be recycled in the state of Georgia," says Jerry Hawk, chair of the 10-state SERDC.

Bringing government and municipal officials to the plants has been instrumental in raising awareness of the connection between commodity markets and municipal collection programs, according to Hartmann. "Now we can go to the communities and say that we know people who need these materials," he says.

Hardegree says the response from government officials has been positive. "It has gotten their attention," she says. "We tend to react when it comes to economics. Elected officials know that's jobs and revenue going into a landfill."

Educating the public sector about the opportunities in the secondary commodities markets could be the

first step in encouraging partnerships between municipalities and private businesses with the goal of higher collection, says Hartmann.

TAKING ACTION. The study's findings have spurred action on a number of fronts, both public and private, says Hartmann. One of the biggest consequences of the study is a statewide push toward single-stream recycling, he says.

SP Newsprint has responded by investing in new sorting technology at its Forest Park facility to allow it to accept commingled materials, says White. "Our main focus is to recover old news for our Dublin mill, but to do that, we realize we need to deal with other materials also," she says. "This gives us the opportunity to get deeper in the waste stream and recover more materials."

Hartmann says this is the kind of cooperation he hopes the study's findings will foster. "We are looking for the private sector to partner with us to increase education, to increase single stream and anything we can do to decrease costs and increase participation," he says. For their support, businesses will have access to locally generated secondary commodities.

SP Newsprint has also partnered with the American Plastics Council (APC) in an effort to increase collection, says White. Both SP and the APC have contributed 25 collection bins each and distributed the 50 in the metro-Atlanta area, noting that the cooperative effort of collecting paper and plastic containers has generated more material of both types. "When you spotlight a material, the other ones benefit too," White says.

When aluminum cans started showing up in the collection bins, White says Novelis and the Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. joined the agreement. "Bringing us all together increases the amount of material we recover," White says.

Georgia's government has also responded to the study's findings. Hartmann says the government has made funds available to estab-

lish collection hubs in the state's rural communities to help bolster collection rates. Hartmann's hope is that these collection hubs and the move toward single stream will help get more material out of Georgia's rural communities. "A lot of our small communities just don't have the infrastructure," he says. "Moving to single stream is going to make it more user-friendly—we're hoping we'll have more communities engaged."

Hartmann also says that state officials will meet this summer to discuss a new waste reduction goal two years after the 25-percent goal was dropped. However, this time, Hartmann says the goal will not be based simply on weight alone, but will note the specific commodities that should be kept out of landfills. "If we did it by weight only, we would focus on paper or glass, we might miss aluminum," he says. "It's going to be a Georgia market-value based approach."

A renewed focus on the economics of recycling could be a boon to the private and public approaches to the business, particularly with current market prices.

However, this economic slant is not meant to take away from the environmental benefits of recycling, says Hargree. "That's been hammered home," she says, adding, "We're trying to move to a new approach."

Hartmann is confident this new approach will be beneficial to municipal recycling programs and the Georgia industries they supply.

"These industries can use what we're throwing away," Hartmann says. "Recycling is not just about protecting the environment, it's about the conservation of our resources and it's about economic development." **rt**

The author is associate editor of Recycling Today and can be contacted at jgubeno@gie.net.



WHY IS RECYCLING IMPORTANT IN GEORGIA?

We've all become aware of the **environmental benefits** of recycling including natural resource, water, and energy conservation. Recycling also helps to keep toxic materials from entering our landfills and reduces landfill greenhouse gas emissions.

But what about recycling's impact on Georgia's economy?

Landfilling materials that conserve natural resources, support business and industry, create jobs, and provide a tax base is not a smart use of resources.

- A **Waste Characterization Study** recently completed by the Georgia Department of Community Affairs indicated that \$250 million in commonly recycled materials are annually discarded in Georgia's landfills.
- The recycling market infrastructure in Georgia makes it one of the most prominent recycling states in the nation.
- One-third of all the **PET plastic**, including beverage containers, recovered in North America is used by Georgia's carpet industry. Mohawk Industries in Summerville, GA is one of the largest end users of PET in the nation.
- The **plastic industry** in Georgia accounts for \$9.0 billion in annual sales and employs 75,000 Georgians with an annual payroll of almost \$1.8 billion.
- The recycling plastic industry accounts for \$1.5 billion in annual sales and employs 36,000 Georgians with an annual payroll of almost \$875 million.
- Georgia is the **second largest pulp and paper producing state in the nation**, with 15 of the state's mills using recycled fiber in their production — 9 of them, including SP Recycling are 100% recycled end-users.
- The **paper industry** represents \$10 billion of annual shipments of pulp, paper and paperboard in Georgia and employs 25,000 Georgians with an annual payroll of over \$1 billion.
- Atlanta is home to the largest **aluminum recycler** in the world, Novelis, who recently relocated its North American headquarters to Atlanta. Aluminum cans are processed at their facility in Greensboro, GA.

Georgia also has large and viable markets for recycling glass, metals including steel and aluminum, other plastics, and tires. It also has a growing industry for recycling electronics and organics such as food waste and yard trimmings.

So, Why Recycle?

RECYCLING MEANS BUSINESS IN GEORGIA

Recycling creates jobs • Recycling saves energy

Recycling conserves our valuable natural resources

Recycling contributes to water conservation

Recycling saves landfill space • Recycling helps reduce pollution

ACT NOW!

DON'T BURY YOUR RESOURCES

Participate in your local recycling program

Expand your local program to:

increase the types of materials collected and
increase participation rates.

