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Upstream > Issues > Corporate Accountability for Waste > History of Waste

HISTORY OF WASTE

Do you ever think about how we ended up with the waste management system we have today?



A century ago urban squalor and disease led citizen reformers to demand cities take action. They did. Cities became responsible for disposing of waste. But urban refuse was different then. It was mostly coal ash and food scraps, with a small proportion (7%) of simple manufactured products like paper and glass. Today, products and packaging comprise 71% of our waste, much of it designed to be thrown away after a single use or containing toxic components. Garbage has changed, but our waste management system has not changed at the same rate.

The history outlined below is excerpted from UPSTREAM'S Issue Brief *Unintended Consequences: Municipal Solid Waste Management and the Throwaway Society*.

The Beginning: Urbanization & Public Health

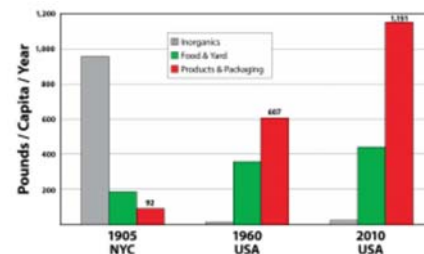
Historians associate the origin of the Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) management system with the urbanization that occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution. Crowding in industrial cities gave rise to repeated epidemics of contagious disease. Fear of these epidemics created political support for public investment in municipal sanitation infrastructure, first to provide clean water and sewerage and later, at the beginning of the 20th Century, to provide for the collection and disposal of municipal refuse.

Citizen Groups Demand Collection Services

Municipal refuse included not only household waste but massive quantities of manure and urine generated by horses and other animals in the city. Pressure from citizens' groups like the Ladies Health Protective Association in New York City and the Municipal Order League in Chicago compelled cities to replace the entrepreneurial "cart men" who provided refuse collection services with uniformed garbage collectors working for the city or for city contractors. By 1914 half of 150 cities surveyed were providing municipal refuse collection and by 1930 MSW management "had been transformed into an institutionally organized, technology focused, municipally operated service."

Composition of Garbage Changes

The key changes over the 20th Century are the dramatic reduction of inorganic wastes and the equally dramatic rise in product wastes. Inorganic wastes largely disappeared because coal ash is now treated as an industrial rather than a municipal waste. Product wastes, meanwhile, increased more than tenfold over the course of the 20th Century, from 92 to 1,242 lbs/person/year in 2000.



New Products Create "Crisis"

As the 20th Century advanced, product waste presented unforeseen challenges to the MSW management system. Many products contained hazardous substances. MSW was typically disposed in local landfills that were little more than open dumps. Municipal landfills were frequently used for co-disposal of growing quantities of industrial process wastes as well as municipal solid waste. During the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, polluted, over-flowing municipal landfills began to be perceived by the public as a "crisis."

As they had done a century earlier, citizens demanded that their communities do something about waste. Citizen pressure and senior government mandates compelled thousands of local governments across North America to decommission local landfills and



build or find new ones that adhered to design criteria intended to contain contaminants. Local governments also invested public resources in recycling programs that would reduce the flow of MSW to landfills and incinerators (the second component).



Public Collection for Recycling Emerges

Starting in the late 1980s, local governments began ramping up public investments in collection programs for collecting recyclables, which were intended to reduce the flow of waste to landfills and incinerators. Reuse was practiced throughout American history by individuals, as was collection for recycling by private sector entrepreneurs. But these practices were nearly abandoned with the advent of mass marketing in the 1950s and 1960s. Private industry ran scrap metal recycling operations as they had done for decades, while churches and other nonprofit organizations collected newspapers and aluminum cans. It was not until the 1980s that municipal curbside collection programs became commonplace. Interestingly, municipal curbside was invented and promoted by the beverage industry as an alternative to deposits and quotas for refillable soft drink containers – which were the first EPR programs in North America.

Enabling the Throw-away Society

Despite municipal collection for recycling, recycling rates stagnated since the mid-1990s and the amount of waste keeps growing. The convenience of weekly waste collection masked the growth in resource consumption. The use of toxic components in everyday products that were thrown away introduced public risks from landfills and incinerators. Public costs were growing, while real incentives for producers and consumers to avoid waste were lacking. Even municipal recycling programs failed to achieve hoped-for results, because most products were not designed for recycling.

Local communities have been shouldering the burden of cleaning up after producers and consumers of wasteful products. By subsidizing wasteful product makers, we're providing welfare for waste.

Resources

- [Unintended Consequences: Waste Management and the Throwaway Society](#) by Helen Spiegelman and Bill Sheehan.
- [The Blue Box Conspiracy](#)
- [The Next Frontier for Municipal Solid Waste](#) by Spiegelman and Sheehan, BioCycle, February 2006
- [A Short History of Waste](#) – presentation by Helen Spiegelman.
- [Change in Waste Chart](#)