

A SORTED AFFAIR  
Tracking Garbage  
by Jane Bogner  
Sunday, Oct 4, 2009

There is a lot of research on how far food and other products travel to your doorstep but very little data on garbage leaving your household.

A recent article in the New York Times told about a project that is doing just that. Mireya Navarro wrote about Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) researchers fishing out a dozen items from residential trash and recycling bins, then tagging them with small electronic tracking devices.

M.I.T.'s Senseable City Laboratory is overseeing the project that will track 3,000 common pieces of garbage, mostly from Seattle, through the waste disposal system over the next three months. There is a ready supply of information on the manufacturing costs of a product and its carbon footprint. This project analyzes the end-of-life of items that we use every day.

How important is this? Carlo Ratti, director of the lab, hopes that people might change their buying habits if they know that the plastic water bottle that was tossed into the garbage instead of the recycling bin will now be buried forever in a landfill just a few miles down the road.

Do materials that are tossed into a recycling bin really get recycled? Most do, but other factors are also in play. Market fluctuations may make it cheaper for a company to ditch items than to recycle them.

The M.I.T. team is using battery-powered tags based on cell phone technology. They say it will take several months to analyze the data. However they have already noticed that while some trash reaches its destination in a couple of days, other items may take four or five weeks to wind their way to landfills or recycling plants.

The tracking has its limitations. The battery life is two to six months and can report back from overseas, but can easily be crushed inside garbage trucks and at processing facilities.

Now the wait is on to see when and where these items actually end up. Will it be landfilled, recycled into another recyclable product (for example an aluminum can), or recycled into a product that will eventually end up in a landfill (for example, a PETE bottle spun into fabric that cannot be recycled)?

For years, I have advocated for Advanced Disposal Fees, similar to can and bottle deposit fees. These fees would go back to the community to cover the costs of hauling recyclables and trash to the appropriate destinations.

There is also a nation-wide movement to introduce legislation for manufacturer's product stewardship. Companies should be making products that can be easily recycled or that last longer. To support this legislation contact the California Product Stewardship Council at [www.caproductstewardship.org](http://www.caproductstewardship.org).

A hearty thank you to the 2693 local volunteers who picked up litter and recyclables on Coastal Cleanup day recently in Solano County. They picked up 4330 pounds of recyclables and 20 tons of trash covering over 87 miles of inland waterways.

Paper Shredding event.

Confidential Paper Shredding will be held on Saturday, October 17 at VALCORE Recycling (38 Sheridan Street, Vallejo 707 645-8258) from 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. There is a charge of \$5 per twenty pounds (maximum: 100 pounds).

*VALCORE Recycling Board Secretary Jane Bogner's "A Sorted Affair" is published every other week in the Times-Herald. For recycling information call VALCORE Recycling at 645-8258 or visit [www.VALCORErecycling.org](http://www.VALCORErecycling.org).*

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