

# SOME CRITICAL QUESTIONS ON NCRA VIDEO PROJECT

The following questions helped guide production of NCRA's video exploring what happens to recyclables after they leave the curb, and what the implications are for economic, environmental, and land use policies. Here they are as a standardized test, (like the SAT). No need to use #2 Black pencil ONLY. No need to FULLY darken the circle.

**1. Do you recycle? What is the full meaning of the term "recycling"?**

- o Most Americans "recycle", that is, participate in programs collecting recyclable materials.
- o Recycling makes a difference, and it makes them feel good, and it should.
- o But simple collection is not "recycling"; true recycling implies collection, processing, and most importantly, successful - and ideally local-conversion into a new product.

**2. Does recycling "happen" at the curb?**

- o It starts there, but it doesn't really "happen" until the loop has been closed

**3. What happens to the materials you "recycle" after the truck drives away from your house?**

- o Most material collected at your home goes to a materials recovery facility (or MRF) for processing, usually involving dirty and difficult hand labor to upgrade collected commodities by sorters that pull marketable materials out by hand, typically leaving 3-5% unrecyclable residue, which is often plastic or contaminated paper.
- o Most material recycled does not come from curbside programs, but rather from "buyback" recycling operations that purchase scrap material from other businesses and individual collectors.

**4. Does it matter if recyclables are processed in a foreign country?**

- o Opinions vary on this; some feel it is inevitable that our scrap materials must go offshore for additional processing and manufacturing into finished goods.

- o In fact, most of the recyclable paper, metal, and plastic collected in Northern California collection programs is exported via the Port of Oakland to Pacific Rim countries--China, Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, and other countries.
- o The top two exports by weight from the Port of Oakland are scrap paper and scrap metal. U.S. scrap materials function as the primary raw materials for economies in these countries, which in turn manufacture and import many products sold here.
- o Others are concerned that some exported electronic waste such as computers and cell phones that contain hazardous materials are not processed safely in foreign countries, and can also foul the environment.
- o Still others suggest that development of domestic industries to process and remanufacture collected materials is a more truly sustainable method of recycling in the long run, and feel that this is a neglected aspect of public policy in the U.S.

**5. Which is more sustainable: exporting recyclables for offshore manufacturing or utilizing them in local industry?**

- o It is tempting to think of an economy or ecology being more sustainable in the absence of industry and its inherent environmental impacts.
- o Certainly the Port of Oakland and those who work there derive wealth from the export economy.
- o But if pollution associated with industry is merely exported to other countries that is harder to reconcile in the overall assessment of sustainability.
- o It seems to be common sense that reusing and remanufacturing materials

locally is a more sustainable use of materials and energy and materials, but economic and developmental disparities in different countries of the Pacific Rim and the world have dictated a flow of scrap materials to nations with less expensive operating costs for basic manufacturing.

- o Some suggest the U.S. is now a "post-industrial" nation destined to have an information and service economy, while others protest that a healthy economy requires some basic industries, and that materials collected via recycling represent an opportunity to reinvent a manufacturing economy.

**6. Is our country more or less vulnerable by shedding its basic manufacturing industries?**

- o Manufacturing seems to be undervalued in the current U.S. culture.
- o Manufacturing is often thought of as dirty, anachronistic, or unsightly.
- o Ironically, however, our materialistic "mall" culture is focused on the acquisition of manufactured goods, but there seems to be a disconnect between the factory and the glitzy retail outlet.
- o There are recent manifestations of real economic vulnerability based on a lost or lacking manufacturing base including shortages of steel and cement that are now made largely offshore.
- o These shortages have created spikes in



price for these basic staples that are rupturing budgets of construction projects and bankrupting some of firms involved.

- o Most of the stories peg the main cause as being increased demand for steel and cement in China, which has more domestic capacity and greater geographic proximity to other producers.
- o Political leaders speaking up for the retention and nurturing of U.S. manufacturing are typically derided as protectionist, and against "free trade".
- o Many environmentalists remain unduly suspicious of "industry", which puts even recycling-based manufacturers in an awkward position when they seek to expand or site new facilities.

**7. Much is made, and rightly so, of goals such as Zero Waste and Manufacturer Responsibility, but does a society as consumptive as our have a Responsibility to Manufacture?**

- o Recycling activists who clamor for Zero Waste and cradle to grave responsibility tend to neglect the fact that it's not that easy to manufacture something, can often be more challenging to do so using recycled materials, and so perhaps we should offer more incentives - not just mandates - for responsible

manufacturing. Stated differently, if recycling proponents agree that the true meaning of recycling in fact implies manufacturing, then such activists should automatically become advocates for a healthy manufacturing sector.

- o The idea of Responsibility to Manufacture gets back to the question of sustainability above: does it matter that a city, region, or state consumes much more than it produces, and if so what should be done to strike a greater balance?

**8. Where does recycling policy meet economic policy? And land use policy?**

- o In this video!!!
- o More seriously, that is the crux of this project, to more formally connect recycling as an "environmental" activity with subsequent - ideally local-manufacturing, which is an essential if under appreciated economic activity. The economic studies cited above are another touchstone for this connection.
- o As for the land use connection, the key point is this: when we were mired in the "Throwaway Society", we needed one or maybe two big pieces of land, the landfill itself and maybe a transfer station.
- o Given the widely hailed transition to a

recycling or more hopefully Zero Waste vision for California, there needs to be a realization that the new paradigm will require enough industrially zoned real estate in any region to effect land intensive collection, processing, reuse and remanufacturing of the various materials diverted from the landfill.

- o Even though most recycling-based business is private enterprise, provision for such enterprise has a public purpose akin to dedication of land for sewage treatment, power generation, and other public utilities.

**9. This film has more questions than answers, what gives? How can we get the right answers if we don't get the questions right in the first place?**

- o That's why you need to see this film. Get It?

**10. What do you think? (Essay question for extra points.)**

