

THE STATE OF GARBAGE IN AMERICA: WHERE DOES IT GO?

By region, from least to most landfilling

Region	Landfills	Recycling/ Composting	Waste-to- Energy
New England	31%	29%	39%
West	52%	46%	2%
Mid-Atlantic	59%	27%	14%
USA Total	69%	24%	7%
Midwest	78%	22%	< 1%
South	79%	13%	8%
Great Lakes	81%	14%	4%
Rocky Mountains	88%	11%	1%

Source: Columbia University/BioCycle¹ Data from 2008, reported in 2010.

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

PUENTE HILLS has been a trash destination for Los Angeles since the 1950s, back when it was an ordinary town dump—a rather small, scruffy one on the edge of a dairy farm. It wasn't until 1983 that it would be christened as the future of trash in Los Angeles, a model facility and the solution to what was then declared by political leaders and press headlines to be a "garbage crisis."

The garbage crisis turns out to be something that has been declared with surprising regularity throughout human history. It usually involves the question: *Where are we going to put all the trash?* After a number of false starts and grandiose promises, Los Angeles's leaders answered this question in 1983 by deciding (without actually saying so publicly): Let's bury it all in a canyon on the edge of the San Gabriel Valley and slowly turn it into a garbage mountain. Among other things, this decision guaranteed that, in thirty years, when the canyon was full and the landfill's state permit had

THE STATE OF GARBAGE IN THE WORLD: WHERE DOES IT GO?

By country, from least to most landfilling

Country	Landfills	Recycling/ Composting	Incineration
Germany	0%	66%	34%
Netherlands	1%	60%	39%
Austria	1%	70%	29%
Sweden	2%	49%	49%
Belgium	4%	60%	36%
Denmark	4%	48%	48%
France	32%	34%	34%
Italy	45%	43%	12%
Finland	46%	36%	18%
United Kingdom	48%	40%	11%
Spain	52%	39%	9%
Portugal	62%	20%	18%
USA	69%	24%	7%
Hungary	72%	18%	10%
Poland	78%	21%	1%
Lithuania	96%	4%	0%
Bulgaria	100%	0%	0%

Note: Incineration is for electricity generation and/or heating buildings.

Source: "The Sustainable Waste Management Ladder," Earth Engineering Center, Columbia University, based on Eurostat 2008 data.

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

lapsed, another crisis would erupt, involving the same exact question: *Now where are we going to put all the trash?*

It would seem, then, that this is the wrong question to ask, at least if the goal is to permanently end the crisis rather than simply postpone a day of reckoning. After all, a landfill, by definition, will someday be full, and so all it does is enable the continued creation and flow of trash, rather than force a reconsideration of waste. A better question might be: *Why do we have so much trash, and what*

are almost always full at the landfill that bills itself as the Disneyland of dumps.

"There is no other place like it, and no other job like it, either," Big Mike says, gazing fondly at his dusty, noisy workplace. This observation is accompanied by a sigh of satisfaction tinged with regret, because soon, Big Mike knows, it will end. Soon the mountain will be finished, though not gone, of course—a landfill is never gone. It's the question of what's next that has not yet been resolved, that L.A. and the rest of the country are trying to puzzle out, and that will have lasting consequences no matter how it's answered: Is it time to dump the dump as the centerpiece of waste? Or time to hedge our bets once again and find even bigger dumps to take their place?

SELECTED PRODUCTS, PERCENTAGE BY WEIGHT OF TOTAL LANDFILLED TRASH

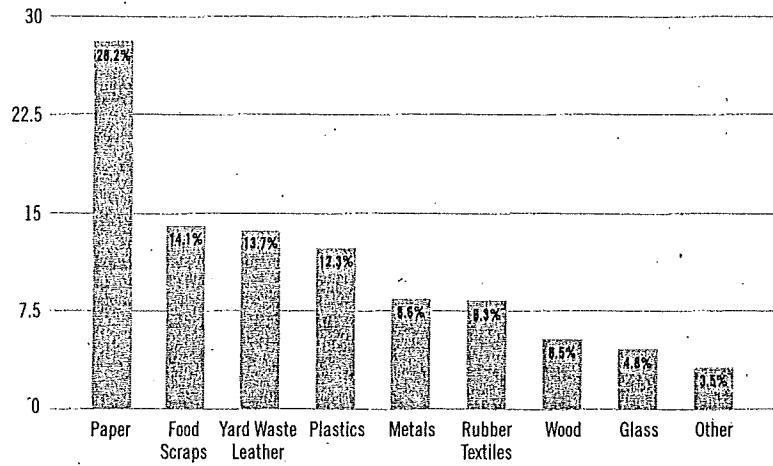
Furniture & Furnishings	6.1%
Clothing & Footwear	4.9%
Wood Packaging	4.9%
Corrugated Boxes	3.2%
Disposable Diapers	2.4%
Beer & Soft Drink Bottles	2.3%
Bags, Sacks & Wraps	2.2%
Carpets & Rugs	2.0%
Rubber Tires	1.9%
Junk Mail	1.1%
PET Plastic Bottles	1.1%
Major Appliances	0.8%
Trash Bags	0.6%
Newspapers	0.6%

Source: EPA*

**Although the EPA data on the quantity of waste generation in the U.S. is flawed, its analysis of the composition of trash depicted here continues to be useful and reliable. These calculations are informed in part by studies of real-world samples of typical Americans' trash—how much of it is plastic, metal, paper, food scraps and so on. These figures are expressed in the EPA annual municipal solid waste reports as percentages of the total waste stream, as in the example of carpets and rugs, which are reported to comprise 2 percent of the total weight of trash sent to landfills. This is a different methodology from the flawed material flow analysis used to calculate total tonnage of waste. Extrapolating national estimates from real-world samples is a tried-and-true, scientifically valid technique.*

What's in Our Trash?

Percentage of materials we throw away, by weight,
before recycling and composting

*What's in Our Landfills?*

Percentage of product categories we bury in landfills, by weight,
after recycling and composting

