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Thinking in Systems

This year, systems thinking has been our guidepost at the Nebraska Recycling Council. Why is systems thinking important? Because we tend to get stuck in short term, reactive thinking instead of dreaming big about what is possible. The field of systems science maps feedstocks and flows, and that pretty much sums up what recycling is. The end goal of systems thinking is to gain new insights about how the system works and why, where its problems are, and how changes can be made to make the system more effective and efficient.



Donella Meadows was a pioneering environmental and systems scientist. I sometimes go to her writings for inspiration. I found this great passage she wrote in 1989: “What we are doing so far is separation, not recycling. We’re figuring out how to reclaim materials before they get to the dump. We have barely begun to close the loop — to re-use major materials in the same products. Newspapers back to newspapers. Plastic soda bottles back to plastic soda bottles.”

“Product-to-same-product recycling is the only kind that can work in the long run. ...the plastics industry is congratulating itself too soon for turning soda bottles into plastic flowerpots. It doesn’t take much of a genius to reflect upon the nation’s consumption rate of soda versus flowerpots to predict a market collapse due to a flowerpot glut.”

Thirty years hence, only 9% of the world’s plastics are recycled and 8 million metric tons of plastic flow into the oceans every year. Packaging consumes 35 to 45% of all synthetic polymers produced in total. We’ve all heard, but it’s worth repeating, by 2025, 6 years from now, there will be 1 ton of plastics in the ocean for every 3 tons of fish. By 2050, there will be more plastics than fish. Even worse, the World Bank just came out with a report projecting that all waste generation will increase globally by 70% if current conditions persist.

There are no perfect solutions, but systems thinking allows us to make informed choices, and that’s the improvement. So where do we begin? Leveraging change at the community level is essential. Elected leaders have the power to change the presence and types of recycling programs; to define what “recycling” means for their community, and to demand measurement and accountability.

Later this year NRC will unveil some new “fact sheets” designed to help elected officials consider their options for solid waste and recycling programs. Next year we plan to create a Community Recycling Toolkit with an Assessment tool, a Community Action Plan template, Sample ordinances, and more.

Deliverables like these are very useful, but the world changes for the better or worse depending on the choices *people* make, our consumption of goods, our role as citizens. And it’s the system of people, processes, feedstocks and flows that will make all the difference. It’s past time to take stock of the system, to make better choices, and to dream big of how we want our world to be in the long run.

Do you need a better way to communicate with your residents about recycling?



VS



Join us for two online demonstrations to learn about digital platforms designed to improve your community's recycling rate, reduce contamination, and send reminders about collection schedules. Recycle Coach and ReCollect will offer demos of their competing platforms that include collection calendars, waste wizards (which bin is correct for this material?), special collection services, and educational messages.

Recycle Coach
October 8, 2018
2:00 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.

Call 1-646-307-1990
 Conference ID 753-537-726#

[JOIN THE MEETING](#)

ReCollect
October 12, 2018
10:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m.

Call 1-734-746-0035
 Conference ID 626-908-818#

[JOIN THE MEETING](#)

Free Webinar October 18th



Sustainable Business in Nebraska: Building an Ecosystem

with Adam Hammes

Adam recently took a hyper-local approach to sustainable business by publishing a book filled with strategy and implementation... but only highlighting business case studies from local Iowa companies. The results were impressive, and he has begun the process of licensing his book to other states to replicate that success. A book focused on local companies increases interest from the public, business colleges, chambers of commerce, and other businesses in that state. Iowa is looking to double the size of their sustainable business association this year, thanks to these efforts.

Thursday, October 18th
noon to 1:00pm

[REGISTER NOW!](#)

Webinars & Events



[Mainstreaming sustainability: How to connect dots and create impact](#)
 SLPS | Thursday, October 4 | 3:30-4:30pm

[Electronic recycling event in Plattsburgh](#)
 Saturday, October 6 | 9:00am-noon | east end of Main Street

[America Recycles Day](#)
 November 15 | Be on the lookout for more information from NRC!

Articles of Interest



[A road full of bottlenecks: Dutch cycle path is made of plastic waste](#)
First path entirely made of recycled bottles, cups and packaging opens

[Will there ever be one standard recycling measurement?](#)
For a unit of measurement that carries so much weight with policymakers, press and the public, it's remarkable how little agreement there is around the best way to calculate recycling rates.

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