

Submission to the 11-29-04 Ann Arbor News “Your World” column:

Recycling aluminum makes cents

One of the best things Americans can do to help the environment is one of the most commonly overlooked: aluminum recycling.

Why is aluminum so important to recycle? Well, for starters, it takes 95% more energy to manufacture aluminum from raw ore than from recycled aluminum. Manufacturing aluminum from virgin materials produces greenhouse gases, sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions (contributors to smog and acid rain). Strip mining and smelting to make aluminum causes habitat loss and toxic runoff in pristine environments around the world.

And in contrast to other materials, aluminum doesn't lose quality in the recycling process, so is infinitely recyclable. Recycled aluminum earns from ten to twenty times more than plastic, glass and other materials. Used aluminum beverage cans have a value over \$1,000 a ton, a rate far greater than other commodities in the waste stream.

Despite the huge profit margin it affords, the rate of aluminum recycling has been dropping steadily, now at its lowest point in 25 years. We've wasted over a trillion cans, a quantity of scrap aluminum worth about \$21 billion at today's market prices.

How can this be, when so many people have made recycling a part of their lifestyle? Unfortunately, over a third of single-serving beverages are consumed away from home, and most of these are trashed—this is money down the drain. For instance, cash-strapped schools that allow students to put aluminum cans in the trash are losing out on a valuable potential source of income.

Trashing an aluminum can wastes as much energy as pouring out half of that can's volume of gasoline. Raising our aluminum recycling rates would significantly reduce our country's demand on energy. Think of WWII when metal recycling was a patriotic duty! Other countries are doing it. For instance, Sweden now recycles 86% of their aluminum cans, whereas Americans recycle less than 50%.

What can you do? Never trash aluminum cans, even if it means carrying them home. Wash and recycle aluminum pie tins, take-out containers, and foil. Recycle aluminum products such as siding, lawn chairs, screen doors and windows. If your community doesn't have curbside aluminum pick-up, then take it to the Drop-Off Station at 2950 Ellsworth Road, any day but Sundays. And support expansion of Michigan's bottle bill, to include the many aluminum beverage containers that currently don't have a deposit.

To learn more about aluminum recycling, visit www.container-recycling.org. Remember the saying, “Don't throw away a good thing”? Recycling aluminum is not just good, it's great!

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