

**Press Statement
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Stop Trashing the Climate

Welcome everyone. Thank you for joining us today to hear about how the trash we set out at the curb is directly linked to greenhouse gas emissions.

We waste an awful lot in the U.S. – 170 million tons each year of paper, plastics, metals, textiles, glass, and other materials. Almost 4 million tons alone are junk mail. One-third is packaging.

There's a direct connection between the fact that Americans use one-third of the Earth's timber and paper and that deforestation accounts for as much as 30% of global greenhouse gas emissions, or that Americans generate 22% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions and produce 30% of the world's waste.

For every item that is landfilled or incinerated, a new one must be extracted, processed, and manufactured from raw materials to take its place. More trees must be cut down to make paper. More ore must be mined for metal production. More petroleum must be processed into plastics. Trash is the tip of a very big iceberg. For every ton of municipal trash, about 71 tons of waste are produced during manufacturing, mining, oil and gas exploration, agriculture, and coal combustion. This requires a constant flow of resources to be pulled out of the Earth, processed in factories, shipped around the world, and burned or buried in our communities. Needless-to-say, at each step, energy is consumed and greenhouse gases are released into the atmosphere.

Stop Trashing the Climate, the new report we are releasing today, documents how this one-way flow of materials from extraction to disposal directly contributes to climate change. Indeed, we have found that wasting is linked to core contributors of global climate change such as industrial energy use, transportation, and deforestation. When we minimize waste, we reduce greenhouse gases in these and other sectors, sectors that together represent more than one-third of all U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

But we have good news too. *Stop Trashing the Climate* provides compelling evidence that preventing waste and expanding reuse, recycling, and composting – that is, aiming for zero waste – is one of the fastest, cheapest, and most effective strategies available for combating climate change. Significantly decreasing waste disposed in landfills and incinerators can offer climate protection benefits equivalent to closing 21% of the coal-fired power plants in the U.S. This puts the 3Rs – reduce, reuse, recycle, along with composting, in the same league as other leading climate protection proposals such as improving national vehicle fuel efficiency, retrofitting lighting, and protecting forests.

A zero waste path saves more greenhouse gas emissions than investing in nuclear power, and likely at a fraction of the cost and liability.

This week Congress is debating climate legislation and the Senate is already taking up amendments—including amendments to give billions more taxpayer dollars to the nuclear power industry. Such handouts, along with the current handouts to landfills and incinerators under the guise of “renewable energy,” are the opposite of what is needed.

We hope that the information in this report will give legislators in Congress a good reason to streamline permitting of recycling and composting operations over nuclear power plants, landfills, or incinerators.

One strategy we highlight in this report for its critical importance *is* composting. By avoiding landfill methane emissions, composting in particular is a vital tactic in the battle to stop Arctic ice melting. Biodegradable materials are a liability when buried and burned but an asset when composted. Why? Because in landfills, biodegradable materials (such as food scraps, yard trimmings, and paper) produce methane, a potent and short-lived greenhouse gas. And landfills are a top source of methane. Unfortunately landfill gas capture systems represent a band-aid, end-of-pipe approach that is not effective in preventing methane emissions to the atmosphere. We have the opportunity to stop these emissions by investing in composting. Diverting organic materials to compost will also return these nutrients to the soil. We now know how important that is, as our soils are being depleted at an unsustainable rate.

When we looked at future projections for climate change, we found that leading scientists now agree that atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations must decline over the next 15 years in order to avoid rapid and widespread climate change. But, all our tools to measure greenhouse gases evaluate the effects of the gases over 100 years. With this report, we’re trying to change the dialogue to reflect the urgency of our situation. If we have less than two decades to curb greenhouse gas emissions, then let’s measure the impact of these gases over the short term and not over 100 years.

Over the 100-year time line, methane has a global warming potential 25 times more potent than CO₂. But on a 20-year time horizon, this global warming potential jumps to 72 times that of CO₂. What does this mean? It means, for instance, that the impact of methane emissions from landfills in the short term are three times higher than reported. And it points to the need to target methane now.

We recommend that policymakers highlight the impact of methane in the short term by evaluating emissions on a 20-year time horizon. This will strengthen the case for stopping the disposal of biodegradable materials. Methane is so potent in the short term we need to prevent its generation in the first place. Instead of being buried *or burned*, biodegradable materials should be composted.

Methane from landfills is far from the end of the story. We also expose incinerators as energy wasters rather than generators, and as significant emitters of carbon dioxide. Incinerators emit more carbon dioxide per megawatt-hour than coal-fired, oil-fired, or natural-gas fired power plants. And because recycling conserves 3 to 5 times the energy these facilities purport to generate, we label them as “waste of energy” or WOE facilities. In other words, incinerating trash is akin to spending 3 to 5 units of energy to make 1 unit.

There is huge potential for waste prevention, reuse, recycling, and composting to put us on the path to climate stability.

But to realize the climate benefits of a zero waste path, action is needed now. We have identified a number of priority policies in this report. These include:

- Setting local and national zero waste targets, focusing on 20-year plans.
- Eliminating subsidies to landfills and incinerators.
- Ending the practice of waste incineration.
- Stopping biodegradable materials from being sent to landfills and incinerators.
- Expanding the national reuse, recycling, and composting infrastructure.

The climate benefits of a zero waste approach are just the beginning. By cutting waste, we would not only better protect the planet's climate, we would also double or triple the life of existing landfills, eliminate the need to build expensive new incinerators and landfills, create jobs, build healthier and more equitable communities, restore the country's top soil, conserve valuable resources, and reduce our reliance on imported goods and fuels. Sorting recyclables alone sustains 10 times more jobs on a per-ton basis than landfill or incinerator disposal systems.

But again, the climate benefits are undeniable: we have the opportunity to close 21% of our coal-fired power plants by changing the way we view our waste – this could be the fastest, cheapest and most effective climate strategy and one that should be immediately front and center in our climate policy.