



Garbage 101

Let's talk trash. One of the things that we probably do every day is throw away garbage. The act is so common that it doesn't even register. We've all heard the cliché: "Out of sight, out of mind." Well, even when garbage is in sight, it seemingly passes under our eyes virtually unnoticed. But it's there. Then it's gone.

How much garbage do we make?

That question is not as simple to answer as it would seem. Just think of all the different sources – or generators – of garbage. You make garbage, right? And your family makes garbage. And schools, businesses, organizations and industries make garbage. Everybody makes garbage. And everybody makes different kinds of garbage.

Before reading any further, here's a term you need to know. What you call trash or garbage, professionals call **solid waste**. There are different kinds of solid waste, but one type measured nationwide by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) and in South Carolina is municipal solid waste (MSW).

What is MSW? MSW has many definitions throughout the nation. In South Carolina, however, MSW is defined as the combined residential, commercial, institutional/non-profit and industrial packaging/office waste that is generated. This includes paper, cans, bottles, food scraps, yard trimmings, packaging and other items. It does not include industrial process waste like scraps and by-products from the manufacturing process, construction and demolition (C&D) debris, automobile bodies, agricultural waste,

combustion ash, mining waste and sewage sludge as well as hazardous, infectious and radioactive waste.

According to the S.C. Solid Waste Policy and Management Act of 1991 (Act), county governments are required to report annually to the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) the amount of MSW recycled within their county. Permitted solid waste facilities also are required to report the amount of waste disposed of at their facilities annually to DHEC.

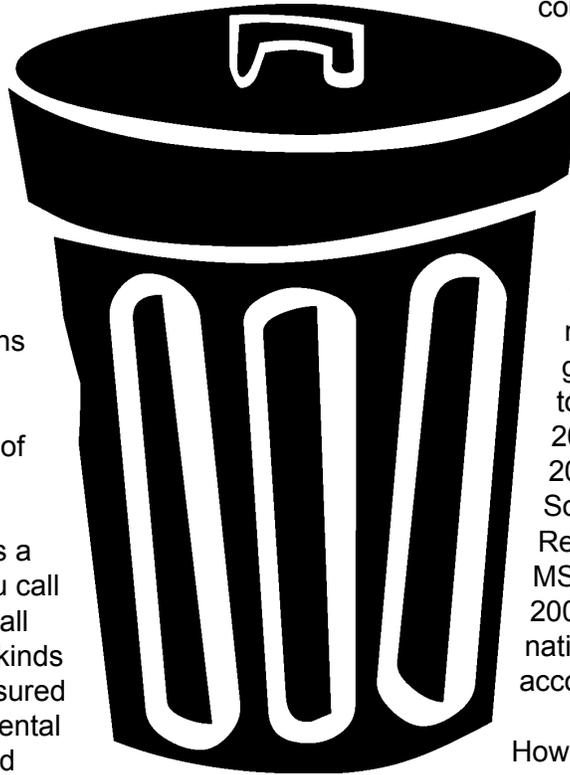
And the number is ...

So, how much MSW did we make? South Carolinians generated more than 5 million tons of MSW in fiscal year (FY) 2007 (July 1, 2006 - June 30, 2007) according to the S.C. Solid Waste Management Annual Report for FY07. The amount of MSW generated in (calendar year) 2006 (the latest numbers available) nationwide was 251 million tons according to the U.S. EPA.

How much MSW do we dispose of every day? South Carolinians disposed of 4.4 pounds of MSW per person per day (p/p/d) in FY07. By comparison, Americans discarded 2.53 p/p/d in 2006 according to the U.S. EPA.

Where does the garbage (MSW) go?

Of the 5 million tons of MSW generated in South Carolina in FY07, more than 1.55 million tons or 31 percent of the state's MSW stream was recycled. Of the remaining amount, 3.2 million tons of MSW or 65 percent was disposed of in the state's 18 MSW landfills while 224,919 tons or 4 percent was sent to



the state's only MSW incinerator, which is located in Charleston County.

There are other places MSW – which can be moved by truck, rail or barge – may go before being disposed of in a landfill, sent to an incinerator or recycled. Some MSW is taken to a **transfer station** where it is compacted and loaded on large trailers. This is done usually when the community is a long distance from a landfill. Some MSW is taken to a material recovery facility where recyclables are sorted from the garbage. The recyclables are taken to companies who process the materials and make them into new products while the garbage goes to a MSW landfill or MSW incinerator.

What's in our garbage?

The U.S. EPA calculates – by weight – what makes up the nation's MSW stream. In 2006, of the total MSW generated before recycling, paper and paperboard (which includes office paper, newspaper and cardboard boxes) was the largest category, comprising 33.9 percent or 85.3 million tons. Yard trimmings were second (12.9 percent or 32.4 million tons) followed by food scraps (12.4 percent or 31.3 million tons), plastic (11.7 percent or 29.5 million tons) and metal (including aluminum cans and steel cans – 7.6 percent or 19.1 million tons). Rubber, leather and textiles (7.3 percent or 18.3 million tons), wood (5.5 percent or 13.9 million tons) and glass (5.3 percent or 13.2 million tons) rounded out the top eight categories. The remaining amount (3.3 percent or about 8.3 million tons) was classified as other.

South Carolina measures the total MSW generated and how much was recycled, but not the total amount of a specific waste. To roughly figure out how much of a specific category of material is being

thrown away in South Carolina, we can use the national percentages determined by the U.S. EPA. There were 5 million tons of MSW generated before recycling in South Carolina in FY07. That means that by using the U.S. EPA's figure of 33.9 percent of the total MSW generated being paper and paperboard products, South Carolinians generated an estimated 1.69 million tons of paper and paperboard products in its MSW waste stream. Remember, it's only an estimate, but the numbers can be used as a guide.

Other estimates of what we generated before recycling in South Carolina include yard trimmings (646,550 tons), food scraps (621,490 tons), plastic (586,406 tons), metal (380,913 tons) and glass (265,637 tons). Again, these are estimates based on the U.S. EPA's national averages.

Think before you throw ...

You know the three Rs – reduce, reuse and recycle. Waste reduction, which is making less garbage in the first place, is the preferred option of waste management. Reduction is followed by reuse, which means repairing items, donating them to a charity or selling them. Reuse is followed by recycling and composting – both of which turn materials that would become waste into valuable new resources.

Disposing of garbage at a landfill or burning it at an incinerator should be the last option for waste management. To learn more about garbage and ways you can reduce the amount you generate at home, at school and at work or more about recycling, composting and buying recycled, visit DHEC's Office of Solid Waste Reduction and Recycling Web site at www.scdhec.gov/recycle or call **1-800-768-7348**.



Office of Solid Waste
Reduction & Recycling
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