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Recession Curbs Nation's Throwaways - March 15, 2009

WASHINGTON — Along with the stock market and the foreclosure rate, a less-heralded barometer has signaled the arrival of hard times: the landfill.

In a wasteful society that typically puts 254 million tons of unwanted stuff at the curb to be thrown away each year, landfill managers say they knew something was amiss in the economy when they saw trash levels start steadily dropping last year.

Now, some are reporting declines as sharp as 30 percent.

"The trash man is the first one to know about a recession because we see it first," said Richard S. Weber, manager of the Loudoun County, Va., landfill.

Trash volume has dropped so much, Weber said, that instead of running out of space in 2012, as had been projected, the Loudoun landfill will gain a year and a half or so of use.

"That's huge," he said.

It's all part of the cycle of stuff that people in the trash business say they have seen in every economic downturn since the end of World War II. People don't buy stuff, so there's less packaging — which typically makes up one-third of all landfill trash — to toss.

More vacant homes and fewer people in a community mean less trash. A stagnant housing market means less construction debris. On tight budgets, people eat out less, so restaurants order less, so there's less to throw away. Landscapers are out of work, so there's less yard debris.

The economy is forcing people to heed the environmentalists' mantra: Reduce! Reuse! Recycle! Repair! But will the reuse and repair trend last in our throwaway society?

Chaz Miller, director of state programs for the National Solid Wastes Management Association, says no.

"We call people saints who get by on very little voluntarily," he said. "We say we'd like to emulate that, but in reality, very few of us do."

Talking Trash

The Environmental Protection Agency says in 2007 the U.S. produced 254.1 million tons of trash. Of that, by weight:

Paper, paperboard packaging: 32.7 percent

Yard trimmings: 12.8 percent

Food scraps: 12.5 percent

Plastics: 12.1 percent

Metals: 8.2 percent

Rubber, leather, textiles: 7.6 percent

Wood: 5.6 percent

Glass: 5.3 percent

Other: 3.2 percent

63.3 million tons of trash was recycled; 21.7 million tons composted; 31.9 million tons burned. The rest, 137.2 million tons, wound up in landfills.

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