Circular File: Numbers Game

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San Francisco's shiny new diversion rate begins to break down under scrutiny.

In early October, the city of San Francisco issued a press release proclaiming it had reached 80 percent landfill diversion. The city also claimed it set recycling and compost rate records that are "the highest of any city in North America." San Francisco officials credited their source reduction, reuse, recycling and composting programs for enabling the high diversion rate.

Oddly, the only tonnage number in the press release was for the 444,000 tons of waste that were landfilled. San Francisco did not give recycling or composting tonnages or percentages. Nor did it say how much waste was generated. So how does it know how much it diverted and if it set any recycling records?

The waste generation number is easy to figure out. If the city sent 20 percent of its waste to landfills, then it generated 2,220,000 tons of waste. That's a lot of garbage. If that number is accurate, then each man, woman and child in San Francisco generated 2.73 tons of trash last year, or more than 3 times as much as EPA's estimated national per person waste generation rate.

As it turns out, San Francisco doesn't know how much waste it generated. It uses generator surveys to estimate a waste baseline. It then updates that number yearly, based on estimates of population growth and economic activity. EPA only uses municipal solid waste in its national waste and recycling data. San Francisco uses that plus construction and demolition debris, nonhazardous industrial waste and sewage sludge. No wonder San Franciscans seem to generate so much trash.

Moreover, the city is using a statecreated waste diversion methodology California abandoned five years ago. It was replaced with a simpler and more accurate per capita disposal rate to measure progress toward waste reduction goals. In its discussion of the new system, CalRecycle notes that "diversion rates were based on estimates of generation that often were inaccurate."

San Francisco can clearly demonstrate consistent and steady reductions in the amount of waste it sends to landfills. But if it cannot give real numbers for waste generation, recycling or composting, how can it claim an 80 percent diversion rate?

I do not mean to belittle San Francisco's immense achievements in recycling and composting. Recology, the city's solid waste and recycling contractor, has long been a leader in both recycling and composting programs. San Francisco has America's longest continuously operating curbside recycling program. The city's curbside program dates back at least to 1962 when Recology's predecessor company began collecting newspapers separately from garbage and placing them in a rack underneath the garbage truck's compaction unit. Over time, that program added cans, bottles, other grades of paper, plastics, and yard and food waste. Recology replaced garbage trucks with recycling trucks.

San Franciscans should be proud of their recovery programs. Their city is clearly among the top recycling and composting cities in North America. But without verifiable data for waste generation, recycling and composting, the city inadvertently undermines its record of success. Tonnage data from the city's contractor-operated residential and commercial recycling, composting and disposal programs are easy to get. But they do not cover the entire waste universe claimed for 80 percent diversion. And perhaps that is the problem. With accurate data focusing on a measureable waste universe, the city will be better able to serve as a model for others to follow.

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