

Report Contends That Recycling Is Not So Wasteful

By [Anthony DePalma](#)

Every New Yorker who wants to save the earth knows that it makes more sense to recycle newspapers and tin cans than to chuck them in the trash. But for at least the last five years there has been debate whether recycling in the city actually makes economic sense, or whether it costs more to recycle than to simply haul everything to a landfill.

That debate will heat up again later today when the [Natural Resources Defense Council](#), an environmental organization with offices in the city, releases a study on recycling costs. The detailed report by [DSM Environmental](#), an independent consulting company based in Vermont, shows that it still costs slightly more to recycle but the difference is narrowing and that within five years, recycling will more than pay for itself.

According to the report, which the [Department of Sanitation](#) helped put together, it costs \$284 a ton to recycle, while it costs \$267 a ton for curbside trash. The \$17-per-ton difference comes to about 6 percent, and is significantly less than it had been a few years ago. When the Independent Budget Office looked at recycling costs in 2004, it found that it cost anywhere from \$34 to \$48 a ton more to recycle than to send garbage to landfills.

"Here is proof positive that recycling is cost competitive with other waste-disposal methods, to say nothing of cutting the city's contribution to global warming," said Eric A. Goldstein, a senior lawyer with the defense council.

New York's recycling programs provide the same environmental benefit as taking roughly 338,000 passenger cars off the road each year, according to the report.

Sanitation Department officials have long argued that recycling does not necessarily pay for itself. During a fiscal crisis in 2002, the apparent cost premium for recycling led Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg to decide to cut back recycling program and reduce the frequency of pickups.

A year later, the administration reversed itself and restarted glass recycling and resumed a weekly recycling schedule citywide.

That on-again, off-again nature of the program hurt recycling efforts in the city because it confused residents, Mr. Goldstein said. Recycling rates dropped sharply from the 20 percent of the waste stream that was collected before the disruption. Recycling rates have recovered somewhat since the full collection program was restored, but they remain lower at just under 17 percent, he said.

The study found that the biggest factor in the higher recycling costs is that sanitation crews usually pick up more material per truck when they are collecting garbage than when they go out for recyclables.

[Vito A. Turso](#), a deputy commissioner at the Department of Sanitation, said that a work crew can fill a garbage truck with 10 to 12 tons of trash during one seven hour shift, and have time enough to bring the load to a transfer station. But the same crew on recycling duty will only pick up about three tons of material in a dual bin recycling truck (or six tons in a large garbage truck) because residents are simply not putting out at the curb everything that can be recycled.

"There are plenty of other things on the metal, plastic and glass side that can be recycled, and if people were more ambitious about recycling those materials, there would be less in waste stream," Mr. Turso said.

The new study, like studies before it, is likely to generate its own debate. It seems that there are several different ways to calculate the cost of doing something as simple as picking up trash or recyclables. The Sanitation Department traditionally includes a range of services — including plowing and snow removal — in its cost calculations, arguing that the same equipment and crews have to be used in several different ways. Recycling advocates say that this skews the numbers in a way that puts recycling at a disadvantage.

The department also does not break out the added cost of special recycling programs for appliances, which is more expensive because Freon and other dangerous materials have to be removed before the metal can be recycled.

The city has a new plan to collect and ship out solid waste that will rely more on barges and marine transfer stations in the boroughs. According to the report, the city has signed some long-term contracts providing access to out-of-state landfills. And as costs for getting rid of trash rise and the price of recycled material increases, recycling will make more sense.