

# There is No Such Thing as Away

By ANGELICA GURULE, Environmental Services Manager, Los Alamos County

We are living in a disposable society. It has become normal to throw away valuable items after only one use, including clothes, straws, bags, utensils, cups, plates, and water bottles. We throw these things away after a single-use, yet they are resource intensive to produce and will take hundreds of years before they decompose.

We trade in our perfectly good vehicles and electronic devices instead of repairing them or keeping them until they reach the end of their life. According to a 2017 United Nations Waste Crimes report, “Globally up to 50 million tons of electronic waste — mainly computers and smartphones — were expected to be discarded annually.”

Fast fashion, inexpensive, mass produced, trendy clothing, is the latest market that has been impacted by the “throw-away” culture. “Globally, we now consume about 80 billion new pieces of clothing every year — 400% more than we were consuming just two decades ago,” reported the University of Queensland.

Fast food restaurants are the most visible producer of waste, by serving meals on cheap, disposable serving ware and discarding massive amounts of perfectly edible food. “The average fast food restaurant generates 200,000 pounds of food waste per year (Statistic Brain, 2013). Multiply 200,000 pounds by 160,000 (the number of fast food restaurants in the U.S.) and that is **32 billion pounds of food waste** generated in American fast food restaurants alone.” Yet, this food could have been donated to people in need.

Annie Leonard, creator of “The Story of Stuff” said it best, “There is no such thing as away. When we throw anything away it must go somewhere.” This throw away culture has resulted in astounding wastefulness, not only the garbage sent to the landfill, but also wasted energy, water, land and other precious resources. Not to mention the environmental pollution we can observe all over the world. In the Advancing Sustainable Materials Management report by Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), per capita waste generation has increased from 2.68lbs/person/day in 1960 to 4.48lbs/ person/day in 2015. How is this possible with all the options to reduce waste through recycle, reuse and even compost? I truly believe if people are informed about the severity of the problem and provided with solutions they would make the right choice. A clear example of this outcome is in our very own community.

Los Alamos County residents are leaders in environmental stewardship and waste management. All recycle programs in the community are voluntary, yet we have remarkable participation rates with 85% of all households recycling and over 50% of households utilizing the new yard trimming program. With these two programs alone, residents are diverting about 25% of all waste from the landfill. The March 2019 Residential Sustainability Report (see graphic) highlights the cost avoided and reduced greenhouse gas emissions resulting from recycling and composting. Yet, there are still opportunities to improve in this area. I am calling all residents to continue to strive for zero waste, meaning no waste goes to the landfill. Here are some tips that will help to shift the culture from “Throw Away” to “Zero Waste.”

**Reduce Food Waste:** 40% of all food produced in the U.S. is discarded. Small changes can eliminate food waste.

- Create a shopping list.
- Shop your fridge and pantry.
- Only buy what you need.
- Store food properly.
- Share leftovers with your neighbors or coworkers
- Donate any other food to Famine to Feast.

**Go Zero Waste:** Zero Waste means nothing goes to the landfill.

- Attend Zero Waste Team meetings to learn more about Zero Waste. Email [zerowaste@lacnm.us](mailto:zerowaste@lacnm.us) and we will invite you to future meetings.
- Create and use a Zero Waste kit that includes a reusable straw, coffee mug, utensils, lunch container, napkin and water bottle.
- Pack your Zero Waste kit when traveling and attending local events. All 2019 Summer Concerts will be Zero Waste.
- Educate others about zero waste.
- Buy durable goods when possible.
- Choose ethical clothing made from products meant to last.

**Backyard Compost:**

- Start a vermicomposting bin. It’s an easy way to compost fruit and veggies, they are super easy and do not smell one bit.
- Try backyard composting. It is easier than you might think and there are many resources online to help you get started.
- Request a yard trimming roll cart to divert all organic materials from your garden. Call Environmental Services at 662-8163.