

## Vol. 5, no. 4 (Winter 2006-2007)

### Throwaway Economy in Trouble

*Lester R. Brown*



In nature, one-way linear flows do not long survive. Nor, by extension, can they long survive in the expanding economy that is a part of the earth's ecosystem. One of the distinctly unhealthy economic trends over the last half-century has been the emergence of a throwaway economy. First conceived following World War II as a way of providing consumers with products, it soon came to be seen also as a vehicle for creating jobs and sustaining economic growth. The more goods produced and discarded, the reasoning went, the more jobs there would be.

What sold throwaways was their convenience. For example, rather than washing cloth towels or napkins, consumers welcomed disposable paper versions. Thus we have substituted facial tissues for handkerchiefs, disposable paper towels for hand towels, disposable table napkins for cloth ones, and throwaway beverage containers for refillable ones. Even the shopping bags we use to carry home throwaway products become part of the garbage flow.

This one-way economy depends on cheap energy. It is also facilitated by what are known in the United States as municipal solid waste management systems. Helen Spiegelman and Bill Sheehan of the Product Policy Institute write that these "have become a perverse public subsidy for the Throwaway Society. More and better waste management at public expense is giving unlimited license to proliferate discards. Today these systems collect 3.4 pounds of product waste a day for each American man, woman, and child—twice as much as in 1960 and ten times as much as 100 years ago. It is time to revamp the system so that it no longer supports the throwaway habit."<sup>1</sup>

The throwaway economy is on a collision course with the earth's geological limits. Aside from running out of landfills near cities, the world is also fast running out of the cheap oil that is used to manufacture and transport throwaway products. Perhaps more fundamentally, there is not enough readily accessible lead, tin, copper, iron ore, or bauxite to sustain the throwaway economy beyond another two or three generations. Assuming an annual 2-percent growth in extraction, U.S. Geological Survey data on current economically recoverable reserves show the world has 18 years of reserves remaining for lead, 20 years for tin, 25 years for copper, 64 years for iron ore, and 69 years for bauxite.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Helen Spiegelman and Bill Sheehan, "Products, Waste, and the End of the Throwaway Society," in Carolyn Raffensperger and Nancy Myers, eds., *The Networker: The Newsletter of the Science and Environmental Health Network*, electronic newsletter, vol. 10, no. 2 (May 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Calculated by Earth Policy Institute from United States Geological Survey, *Mineral Commodity Summaries 2005* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2005).

The cost of hauling garbage from cities is rising as nearby landfills fill up and the price of oil climbs. One of the first major cities to exhaust its locally available landfills was New York. When the Fresh Kills landfill, the local destination for New York's garbage, was permanently closed in March 2001, the city found itself hauling garbage to landfill sites in New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and even Virginia—with some of the sites being 300 miles away.

Given the 12,000 tons of garbage produced each day in New York and assuming a load of 20 tons of garbage for each of the tractor-trailers used for the long-distance hauling, some 600 rigs are needed to move garbage from New York City daily. These tractor-trailers form a convoy nearly nine miles long—impeding traffic, polluting the air, and raising carbon emissions. This daily convoy led Deputy Mayor Joseph J. Lhota, who supervised the Fresh Kills shutdown, to observe that getting rid of the city's trash is now “like a military-style operation on a daily basis.”

Fiscally strapped local communities in other states are willing to take New York's garbage—if they are paid enough. Some see it as an economic bonanza. State governments, however, are saddled with increased road maintenance costs, traffic congestion, increased air pollution, noise, potential water pollution from landfill leakage, and complaints from nearby communities.

Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore wrote to Mayor Rudy Giuliani in 2001 complaining about the use of Virginia as a dumping ground. “I understand the problem New York faces,” he noted, “but the home state of Washington, Jefferson and Madison has no intention of becoming New York's dumping ground.”

Garbage travails are not limited to New York City. Toronto, Canada's largest city, closed its last remaining landfill on December 31, 2002, and now ships all its 1.1-million-ton-per-year garbage to Wayne County, Michigan. Ironically, the state of New Jersey, the recipient of some of New York's waste, is now itself shipping up to 1,000 tons of demolition debris 600 miles—also to Wayne County in Michigan.

The throwaway economy that has been evolving over the last half-century is an aberration, now itself headed for the junk heap of history. The challenge is to redesign the materials economy so that it is compatible with nature – specifically to replace the throwaway economy with a reduce-reuse-recycle economy. Perhaps the focus should be less on what to do with the garbage and more on how to avoid producing it in the first place.

*Lester R. Brown, described as “one of the world's most influential thinkers” by the Washington Post, is Founder and President of Earth Policy Institute <[www.earthpolicy.org](http://www.earthpolicy.org)>, a non-profit environmental research organization based in Washington, D.C., which he founded in May 2001. Some 30 years ago, he pioneered the concept of environmentally sustainable development. One of the world's most widely published authors, his books have appeared in some 40 languages. His most recent book is entitled Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble.*

**POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM** (send comments to [forum@futuretakes.org](mailto:forum@futuretakes.org)):

- *As the throwaway economy becomes progressively less sustainable, how will that impact consumer habits and convenience, especially in a fast-paced society such as the US?*
  - *Is a true steady-state economy possible, and if so, will it emerge? Why or why not?*
-

- *It has been argued that the throwaway mindset has migrated to the workplace and to the family, specifically, throw-away workers (layoffs) and throw-away spouses (divorce). If this is true, will a departure from the throwaway economy have similar social impacts? Conversely, will changes in social values and lifestyles impact what is manufactured?*
- *How can the environmental, climatic, and other long-range economic signals be captured in an economics utility function or otherwise, so that as Ernst von Weizsäcker put it, the market “tells the ecological truth”?*
- *What actions can people begin taking to move away from a throwaway economy?*