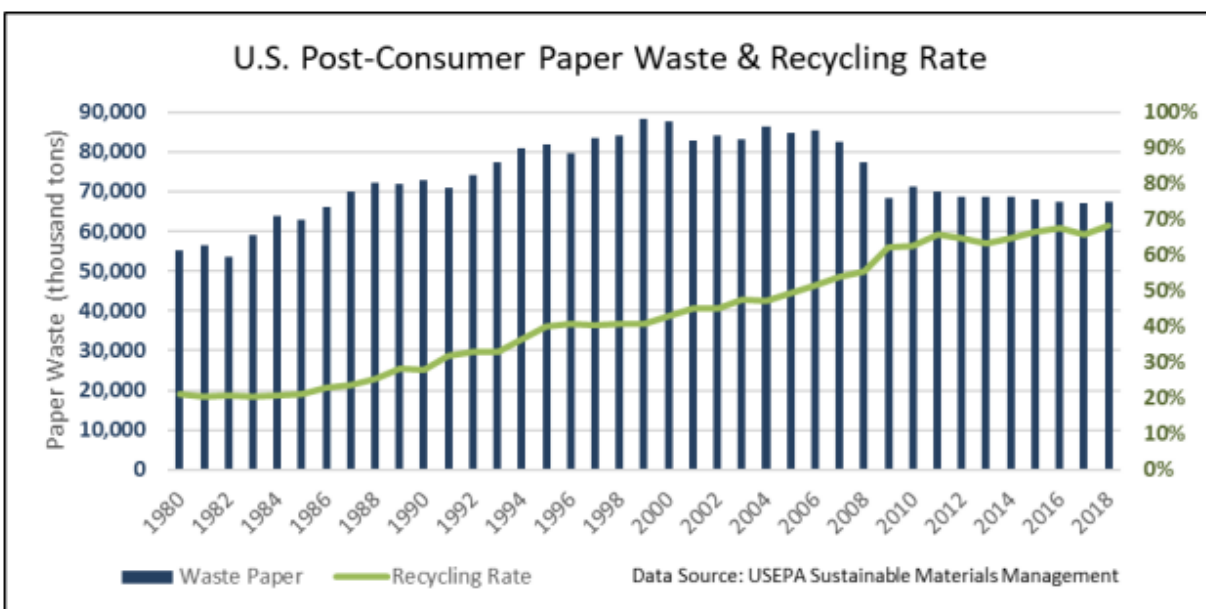


Recycling – The Good, The Not So Bad, & The Ugly

If you don't know me, you should know I care deeply about the environment. So much so that I volunteer for a number of clean up events that occur throughout the year. Adopt-a-Highway, Clinton River Watershed Council's (CRWC) "Weekly Clean", and the Annual Clinton River Cleanup are a few of these events. One of my major take aways is that we need to rethink how we use plastics. The amount of plastic waste I pick up each year is increasing at rates I truly find disturbing.

I also find glass bottles and containers, metal cans, and a few cardboard products, but in much smaller quantities than plastic. This drove me to look at Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and aluminum industry data to better understand why I am seeing so much plastic, small amounts of glass and aluminum cans, and minute amounts of cardboard boxes.

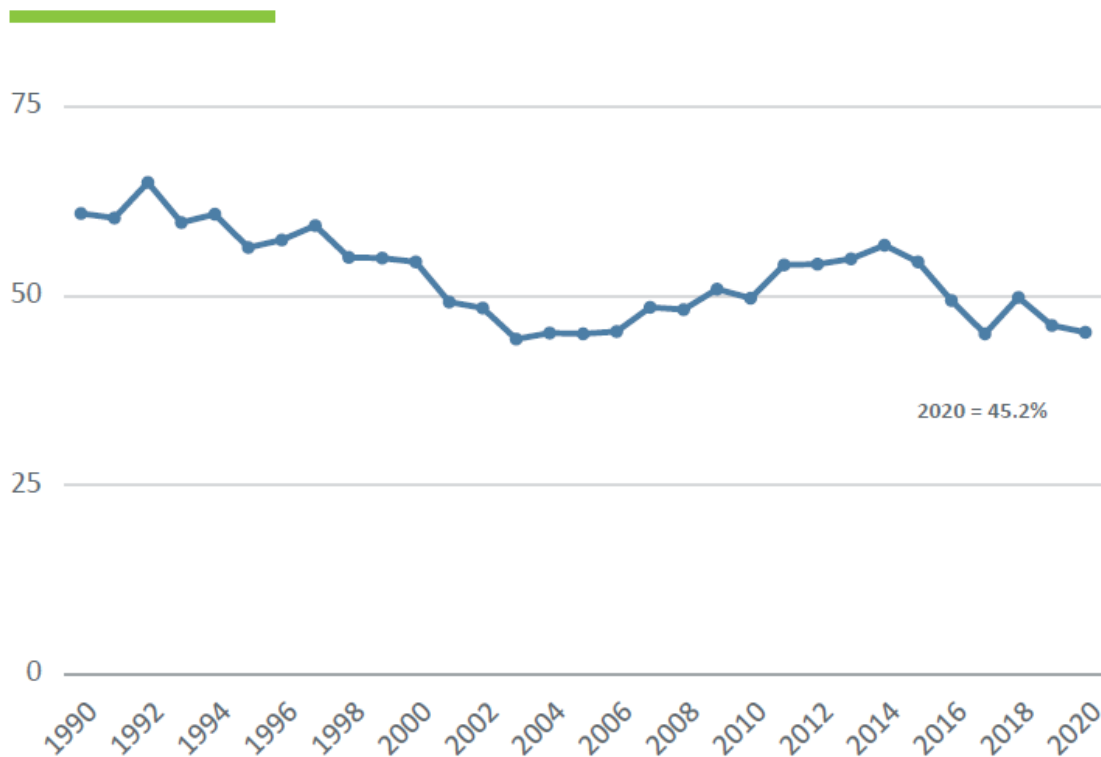
So let's start with the good. Back in December of 2021, I wrote an article espousing how recyclable cardboard and paper are. Paper and paper based products are the most recycled material in the U.S. As you can see from the EPA graph below, the recycling rate of paper has steadily climbed from 21.3% in 1980 to 68.2% in 2018! We should all feel good about our efforts to recycle paper products.



Next, let's look at the not so bad of aluminum cans. According to the Aluminum Association (AA) and Can Manufacturers Institute (CMI), aluminum can recycling for consumers has averaged about 50% over the last 20 years although it was 45.2% for 2020 (see the graph below).



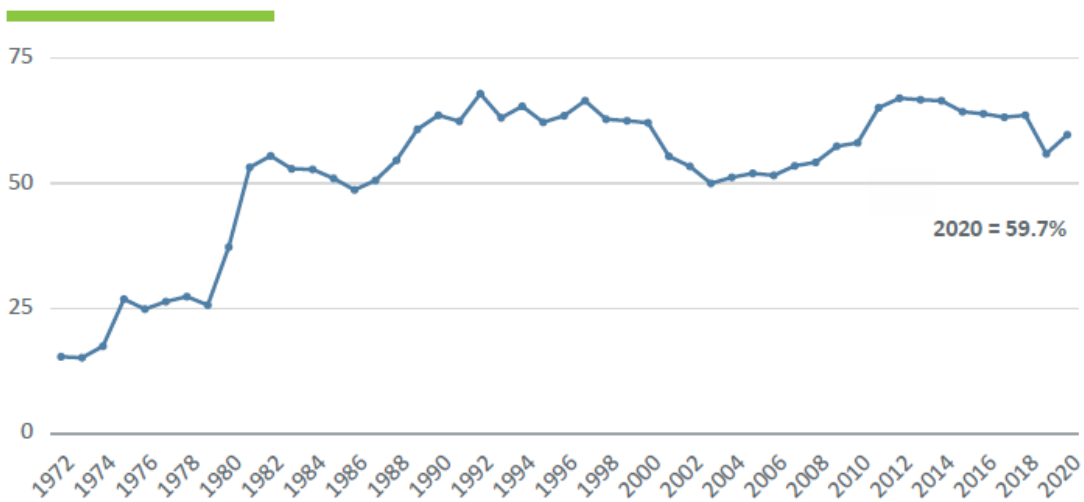
Consumer Aluminum Can Recycling Rate Through the Years



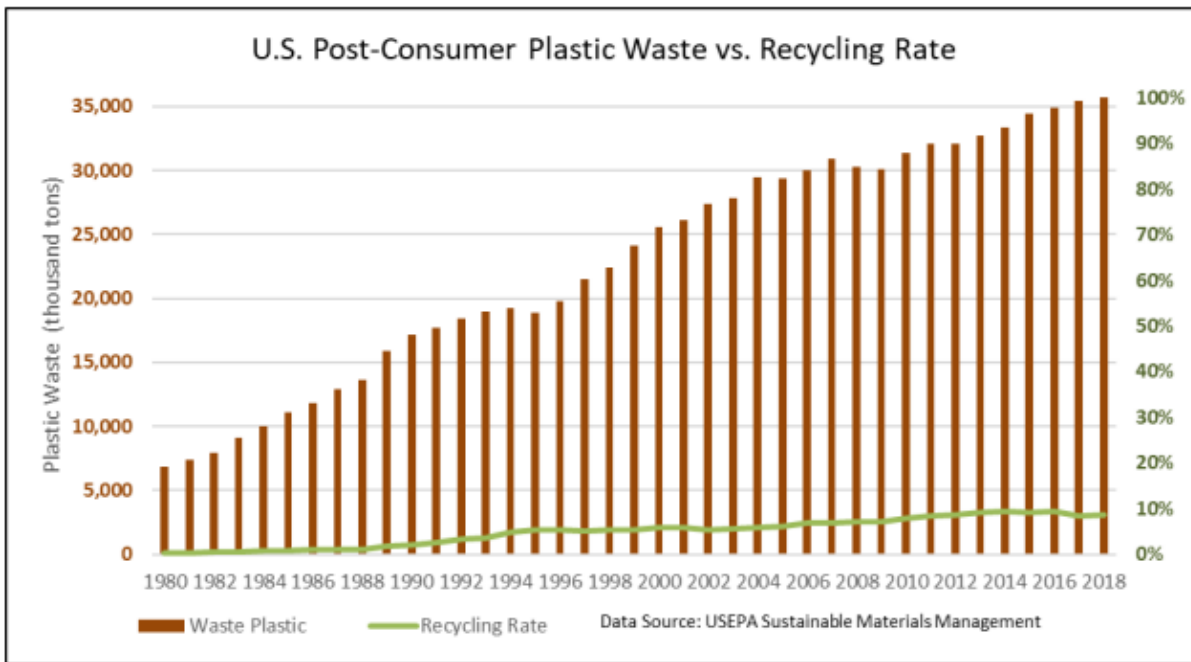
From the aluminum can industry perspective, the recycling rate started at 15.4% in 1972 (see the graph below). The can industry recycling rate has dramatically improved over the last four decades with the 20-year average sitting at 58.6%! Aluminum can recycling is another positive story.



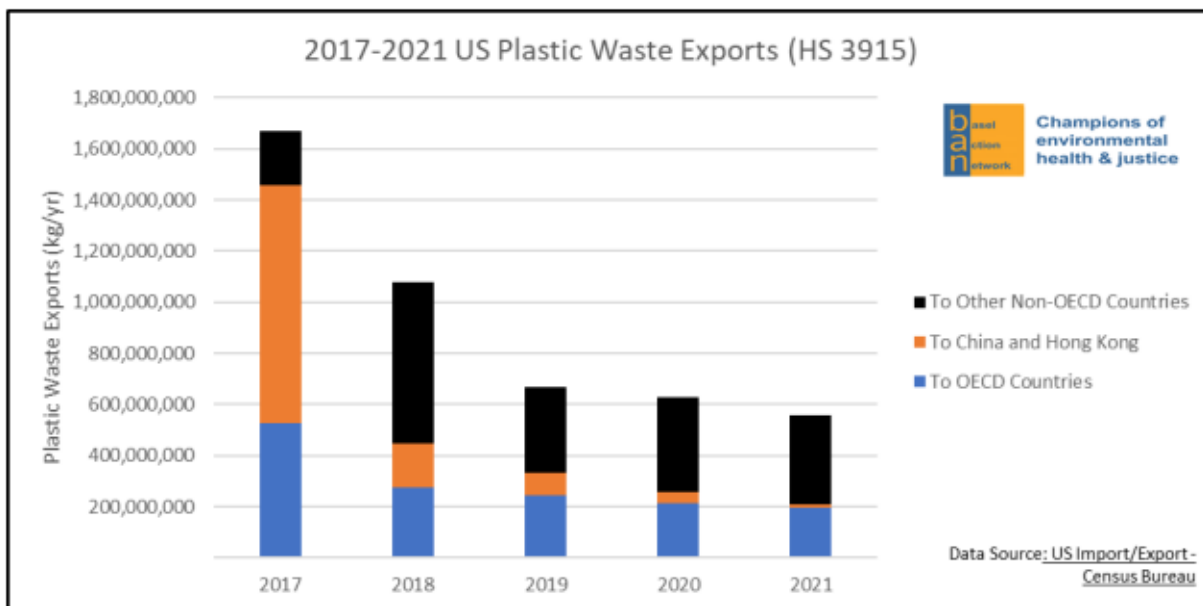
Industry Recycling of Aluminum Cans Through the Years



And now for the ugly – plastics. Look at the EPA graph below. First, notice the amount of plastic waste being generated each year. Back in 1980, we generated 7.4 million tons of plastic waste. The amount of plastic waste has increased five-fold to 35.7 million tons in 2018 and continues to grow each year. Next, look at the deplorable plastic waste recycling rate. The highest recycling rate peaked at 9.5% in 2014. This rate included 2.1 million tons of plastic exported to China. Since then, the plastic recycling rate has slightly declined!



Note the US Import/Export – Census Bureau graph below. The decline in plastic recycling has to do with China (in orange), Hong Kong (in orange), and (38) Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (in blue) reducing U.S. plastic waste they are willing to accept.



In summary, we as consumers need to think about how products are packaged and sold and if there are alternatives. For this month, I want

the data I showed to ferment in your minds. Next month, I will talk about things we each can do to reduce the amount of plastic we use.

Written by: Greg Petrosky

Date: September, 2022