

The dark side of recycling is also green, as in money

By Larry Clark

There is hardly anything that cannot be recycled or repurposed, but if materials aren't available, recycling is stunted.

That's the dark side of recycling – participation and, to a degree, the price of investment. For example it's estimated that only 35 percent of all plastic bottles are separated for recycling.

One of the most amazing advances in technology – at least to me, a technologically challenged consumer – is turning plastic drink bottles into fabric. Synthetic fleece products are made from plastic bottles. Those old bottles can be turned into synthetic yarn. They can be reprocessed into other plastic products.

Reprocessing is one of the great characteristics about plastic, or polymer, products. With the necessary equipment and manufacturing facility, synthetic twine used for tie-downs and baling hay can be remade into more twine. The plastic chairs and furniture sold in the millions of units can be recycled, just like bottles.

The problem is that the bigger the product and the more complex the initial manufacturing process, the more expensive reprocessing becomes.

It's not cheap to take the worn-out chaise lounge you enjoyed on your beach trip and convert it to something new. But we should not put them in the landfill. They are not biodegradable. The considerable investment required for reprocessing is daunting, however.

This is similar to the situation endured by the newspaper industry. Newspapers have been recycled for ages, but recycled newsprint is relatively new. Old newspapers can be used for almost anything requiring cellulose – the basic ingredient in trees and, in turn, newspapers.

But making recycled newsprint demands a different process than the manufacture of new, or virgin, newsprint. So the widespread use of recycled paper in newspaper publishing did not come into its own until existing newsprint mills were refitted or separate mills were built from scratch.

Now, everything from paper towels to the highest-grade print material is available in recycled form. But again, the more complex the printing need, the more expensive the recycled paper.

High-tech recycling is not impossible. Thanks to facilities such as the ever-expanding Eco-Complex at Catawba County's Blackburn Landfill, recycling is not only saving landfill space, but making money. The gas produced in the landfill from organic garbage propels power-generating turbines.

Soon, the complex will be able to use biomass as fuel. Wood waste is turned into electricity. Anything combustible and anything that produces methane or similar gas can be tapped to generate electricity.

But, the materials for recycling must be available.

We can take some comfort that paper and wood are biodegradable, even though they require landfill space and several years to transform into gas-producing biomass. A far better option is to keep them out of the garbage.

Plastic, metal and glass will not rot. They have no business being in the landfill – or in the lake or on the side of the road.

We have come a long way since the time when rural folks had their own trash heaps and a centralized public refuse depository was an open pit affectionately called “The Dump.”

Catawba County residents are above average in recycling. Most of us seem to have bought into recycling. There are some areas and some states that do not have recycling programs. That means glass, plastic, metal and wood are given the heave-ho and fill the dump unnecessarily.

We cannot escape the fact, though, that recycling costs money to implement. The stuff we can reuse is not magically transformed into sheet metal, new glass, new plastic and fine yarn. We must have the facilities to recycle, and we must get the products from the consumer to the manufacturer.

Or, we can quit making disposable products. That’s also costly.

We must reuse our natural resources. We cannot afford to take from nature and make a one-time product this is simply tossed out. It doesn’t make economical or ecological sense to continue a hit-and-miss attitude toward recycling.

That will deepen the murk on the dark side of recycling.