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UPDATED: Industry bites back after New York Times recycling column

By Editorial Staff, Resource Recycling

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By challenging the economic and environmental value of recycling, New York Times science columnist John Tierney has poked the recycling stakeholders hornet's nest. Again.

Among the dozens of groups and companies that have spoken up about a recent story questioning the value of expanding materials recovery are the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI) and the American Chemistry Council (ACC).

"John Tierney paints a confusing and misinformed picture of recycling, calling it 'wasteful,' 'ineffectual,' and 'costly,'" wrote Robin Wiener, president of ISRI. "The reality is that recycling in the United States is a vibrant activity and a key driver in domestic and global manufacturing."

In a statement, the ACC [discussed](#) the benefits of plastics and the recycling of that material, saying recycled plastics are often more valuable than the recycled fibers Tierney defended.

Industry groups and outside [publications are blasting the story](#) that appeared in The New York Times Sunday Review section earlier this month. The article follows the libertarian columnist's "Recycling Is Garbage" story from nearly two decades ago, which broke The New York Times [record for hate mail](#).

ISRI's statement noted the column completely failed to recognize the economic impacts and shortchanged the environmental benefits of recycling.

Athena Lee Bradley, projects manager at the Northeast Recycling Council, also provided a strongly worded [rebuttal](#).

"I'm not sure what's more appalling – Tierney's lack of regard for the impact our production and consumption has on developing nations, the environment, and the loss of resources for future generations or his advocacy for simply 'burying' everything because civilizations have been doing so for 'thousands of years,'" she wrote.

Keep America Beautiful and the National Recycling Coalition (NRC) have also [issued statements](#) expressing disappointment that The New York Times piece could dissuade Americans from tossing materials into the recycling bin. In the NRC statement, the group encouraged stakeholders to utilize tips from a "[How to Respond to Attacks on Recycling](#)" document it drafted in 2000.

"Even though we've extracted these quotes from a document NRC developed 15 years ago, many points still resonate now," said Mark Lichtenstein, president and CEO of NRC. "Today, we understand even more than we did in 2000 about how misinformed attacks undermine the investments, job creation, tax contribution, pollution reduction, and other benefits of recycling."

Rob Kaplan, managing director of the Closed Loop Fund, [authored](#) an annotated critique of the Tierney column, saying the piece "astounded us by the sheer number of inaccurate statements and misrepresentations about the economic and environmental impact of the recycling industry."

Not everybody hated the column, however. "Center-right think tank" The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) [applauded](#) the piece, and the libertarian Reason Foundation published a [supportive blog post](#) about it.



Left-leaning publications criticized the piece. Grist.org said Tierney's "case is at best ideological, at worst nonsensical," and said his real motivation was simply "to puncture the self-satisfied bubble of liberal-leaning Times readers." [Treehugger.com](#) called Tierney "an everything denier" and a "professional contrarian."

On that last point, Tierney might agree. In [an interview](#) with CBS News discussing the latest recycling story, he agreed he should be described as "contrarian."

This story was updated to include statements from The National Recycling Coalition and Keep America Beautiful.



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