

***What is Zero Waste?*** There are many ways to answer this question, but usually the answer is not amenable to a short, succinct response. Our current system of production is designed in a way that accepts and even encourages waste and inefficiency. Its primary focus is on a product or service that a private company produces and delivers to a customer. That simple relationship ignores the resources and energy that went into resource extraction and manufacture, the toxic emissions and contamination, water use and community impacts that are involved in production. It also ignores the transport of raw materials, intermediate and final products to customers using fossil fuels and generating pollution. Packaging and used products eventually make their way to landfills and incinerators for disposal with more toxic emissions and contamination of land and water. The public sector, government and taxpayers, pays for waste management and transportation associated with disposal and for the clean-up of toxic contamination.

Once you identify all the inefficiencies and waste in such a production system it becomes relatively easy to develop public policies to move government and the private sector in a more sustainable direction. Zeroing Out Waste and Inefficiency is that direction. Zero Waste refers to a broad set of policies, goals and activism aimed at moving toward a more sustainable, healthy and socially just system. The chief methods to zeroing out waste include waste prevention or reduction, reuse of goods in good condition, recycling and remanufacture of materials and composting of organic materials, such as food and yard waste. Producers can be held accountable through extended producer legislation, which can require less packaging or recycling, such as measures to deal with electronic waste and requiring bottle deposits. Many private companies have embraced Zero Waste internally and have realized millions of dollars in their own operations by emphasizing waste prevention, reuse, recycling and composting. While the federal government has also embraced Zero Waste opportunities, these programs were never adequately expanded to state and local governments under the Bush administration. The primary difficulty in advancing zero waste is related to how ingrained our current system of production is and the advertising that has promoted the benefits of a disposal society. Thus, Zero waste sounds idealistic and realistically impossible to achieve, when society can in fact begin the transition to zero waste by first setting ambitious goals and then adopting a set of realistic objectives for the short term. Ten years ago, would anyone have imagined that organic produce would be available in every grocery store, or that organic milk would have so much consumer demand that companies do not have enough farmers producing it.