

Is Zero Waste Possible?

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“Preventing waste, recycling and composting are some of the easiest and most cost-effective actions anyone can take to protect our environment and improve human welfare,” says Robert Haley, Zero Waste Manager for San Francisco’s Department of the Environment. Haley will appear in the documentary *Racing to Zero*, coming soon to the Salem Progressive Film Series, and also address the audience by Skype in a discussion to follow the film.

Racing to Zero takes a look at people and organizations in Northern California who are attempting to reduce waste production to 0%, by finding ways to reuse and recycle almost everything we currently throw in the garbage. The focus is primarily on San Francisco, which in 2001 passed resolutions aiming for 75% landfill reduction by 2010, and zero waste by 2020.

Directed by Christopher Beaver, the 55-minute film is the rare documentary with no talking heads and no charts or graphs. Instead we follow different individuals in both public and private organizations who show us what they do daily to increase recycling and reuse, for everything from paper to electronics to food.

“This country consumes more and wastes more than any other,” the film’s producer, Diana Fuller, told *Salem Weekly*. When she began to study the issue, she says she, “had visions of a Mad Max scenario with mountains of garbage increasing at the landfills and surrounding us with piles of waste and methane steaming out to poison everything. Then I started to think about the genesis of so many products, our precious natural resources, and then I confronted plastic, and we were back to oil, oil, oil.”

One of the themes of the film is how often yesteryear’s garbage can be turned into a valuable commodity. We see mountains of filthy bottles and cans and learn that they are prized as raw materials by manufacturers. Unwanted plant matter is composted into nutrient-rich soil.

In an entertaining scene we meet “recycling auditors” who, in the middle of the night, probe into curbside recycling containers to see how the citizens are doing at recycling properly. If they find things in the wrong containers, they write a “friendly reminder” to the resident, which is later followed up by a door-to-door, face-to-face meeting.

“The simple substitution of the word ‘resource’ for the word ‘garbage,’” Fuller says, “transformed a culture [and] produced a wealth of new industries.”

Will it ever be possible to eliminate garbage entirely? *Racing to Zero* suggests the answer may soon come now that San Francisco is already recycling 80% of its waste. As Haley says, that means they are now “struggling with the last 20%.” Most of the struggle is with the dozens of different types of plastics that are almost ubiquitous in industrialized societies.

While the film is short, the pace seems relatively leisurely, and the viewer is not bombarded with numbers or factoids. We move gracefully yet purposefully from one person to another as they talk about and show us their work. If this sounds less didactic than the average politically-oriented documentary, it is. Instead of “You should do this and not do that,” it’s more like “Hey, look what we’re doing.”

It is a fairly easy hour, yet it still carries impact.

Fuller told us she’s convinced there is reason to hope. “We looked and saw garbage, disappearing natural resources, destroyed oceans and wondered, is there anything that we, individually could still do about it? The answer is ‘yes.’ Racing to Zero presents new solutions to these global problems... Most importantly, we could all be part of this.”
