Foreword

The United States annually generates more than 135 million tons of municipal solid waste (MSW). Its disposal is a rapidly growing problem for many areas of the country, where such traditional methods as open dumping, landfill, uncontrolled incineration, and ocean burial are too expensive or environmentally unacceptable. At the same time, MSW contains over two-thirds of the national consumption of paper and glass, over one-fifth of the aluminum, and nearly one-eighth of the iron and steel. If burned, the combustible portion of MSW would be equivalent to about 1.9 percent of the Nation’s annual energy use.

Resource recovery and recycling materials and energy from MSW can play significant roles in helping to solve waste generation and disposal problems. In addition, resource recovery, recycling, and reuse can contribute to the wise and efficient use of materials, to conserving materials and energy, to preserving the environment, and to improving the balance of trade by reducing our dependence on imported natural resources.

This report addresses important questions that have arisen about the feasibility of various approaches to resource recovery, recycling, and reuse. It presents the results of an examination of important technological, economic, and institutional factors. Federal incentives and other policies that might stimulate resource recovery, recycling, and reuse are identified and their effectiveness and impacts are assessed.

The study was requested by the Technology Assessment Board on behalf of the House Committee on Science and Technology and the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. We hope that these committees, and others including the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, will find this report helpful as they confront the continuing problems and opportunities of solid waste management, resource recovery, recycling, energy supply and conservation, and product reuse.

JOHN H. GIBBONS
Director
Materials and Energy
From Municipal Solid Waste
Advisory Panel

Lois Sharpe, Chairman
League of Women Voters of the United States (retired)

Seymour L. Blum*
Northern Energy Corporation

Frank Fernbach
United Steel Workers of America (retired)

Bruce Hannon
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

William J. Harris, Jr. *
Association of American Railroads

R. Talbot Page
Resources for the Future, Inc.

Simon D. Strauss
ASARCO, Inc.

OTA Materials Advisory Committee

James Boyd, Chairman
Materials Associates

Earl H. Beistline
University of Alaska

Julius Harwood
Ford Motor Company

Franklin P. Huddle
Congressional Research Service

Lynton K. Caldwell
Indiana University

Elburt F. Osborn
Carnegie Institution of Washington

Robert L. Coble
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Richard B. Priest
Sears, Roebuck and Company

Lloyd M. Cooke
Economic Development Council of New York City, Inc.

N. E. Promisel
National Materials Advisory Board

Frank Fernbach
United Steel Workers of America [retired]

Lois Sharpe
League of Women Voters (retired)

James H. Gary
Colorado School of Mines

Raymond L. Smith
Michigan Technological University

Edwin A. Gee
International Paper Company

Simon D. Strauss
ASARCO, Inc.

Bruce Hannon
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

George A. Watson
Ferroalloys Association

*Through May 1977.

NOTE: The Advisory Panel and the Materials Advisory Committee provided advice and comment throughout the assessment, but do not necessarily approve, disapprove, or endorse the report for which OTA assumes full responsibility.
OTA Materials and Energy
From Municipal Solid Waste
Project Staff

Albert E. Paladino, Materials Group Manager (through December 1978)
Audrey Buyrn, Materials Group Manager from January 1979
Christopher T. Hill, Project Director
Patricia L. Poulton, Materials staff
Charles M. Overby, Materials staff
Renee Ford, consulting editor

OTA Administrative Staff
Carol A. Drohan    Jackie S. Robinson    Bernadette Balakit
Mary J. Adams     Mona M. Chick        Joyce E. Robinson

OTA Publishing Staff
John C. Holmes, publishing Officer
Kathie S. Boss    Joanne Heming
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John B. Wachtman, National Bureau of Standards
Robert S. Kaplan, Bureau of Mines
Harvey Yakowitz, National Bureau of Standards