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ECONOMY, RISE IN RECYCLING FAIL TO STEM INCREASE IN NORTH CAROLINA SOLID WASTE DISPOSAL

RALEIGH – The economic slowdown, military deployment and increases in recycling were not enough to rein in North Carolina’s growing waste stream, according to the latest Solid Waste Management Annual Report issued by the state’s Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

North Carolina continues a trend of increasing the amount of solid waste requiring disposal. The fiscal year 2002-2003 report puts the state per capita disposal rate at 1.23 tons per person per year, a 1 percent increase over the last fiscal year’s 1.22 rate. In total, North Carolinians disposed of 10,236,960 tons of waste last fiscal year – an increase of 237,676 tons from the previous fiscal year.

Why the continued rise in solid waste disposal? “One theory gaining support is that consumers simply use more and more disposable items and choose not to recycle to anywhere near the potential,” said Paul Crissman, head of the Solid Waste Planning & Program Management Branch of the Division of Waste Management.

A related issue – landfill capacity – is a looming problem for parts of North Carolina. While the first-ever statewide analysis of capacity indicated the state has 16 years remaining landfill capacity, this number is misleading because certain regions of the state have more limited capacity and will soon face very difficult, expensive choices. As this problem will emerge unevenly across the state, it will be a regional dilemma and coordination and cooperation will be difficult. This is due in large part because landfills are perceived as bad neighbors, making local elected officials often reluctant to approve them.

The report recommendations echo those of the previous report: that municipalities increase source reduction and recycling efforts, as well as the source-separated composting of organics to minimize the need for more landfill space as the state’s population and per capita disposal continues to increase. Enhancement of recycling infrastructure and markets to increase source reduction and recycling would also help reduce the need for additional landfill capacity.

Other findings from the annual report include:

- While some improvement occurred in the recovery of common household recyclables, there is still much room for growth in the participation of residents in recycling and in the collection of bottles, cans and paper. The collection of plastic bottles followed a national trend of declining recovery in FY 2002-03 at a time when plastics are becoming a more prevalent type of packaging.
- The winter ice storms of 2002 showed once again how severe weather can dramatically increase the amount of yard waste that communities have to manage. However, because of widespread municipal mulch and compost programs, the vast majority of yard waste was diverted from disposal.
- North Carolinians continue to be under-served by programs collecting materials such as household hazardous waste, antifreeze and oil filters. Parts of the state still have no public oil collection sites.
- Markets for recyclable materials were very stable and consistent in 2002-03, and continue to be able to absorb more tonnage from community recycling programs.

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- The state's recycling economy continues to expand with the addition and upgrading of material recovery facilities in different parts of the state, and the launch of a major organics recycling facility and a new recycled glass processor in 2003. A number of other large-scale facility openings are expected in 2004, in addition to the expansion of many smaller recycling companies across North Carolina.
- North Carolina's top 10 waste-producing counties continued to represent almost half of all waste disposed in the state. Although recycling dropped slightly, these counties represent 44.6 percent of all local government recycling. Of the 10, only Guilford, Durham and Buncombe counties contributed a greater percentage of state's recycled tonnage than their share of the disposed tonnage, in part because of excellent municipal programs within those counties. Guilford, for example, generated 6.9 percent of the state's waste, but was responsible for 8.8 percent of the recyclables collected by local governments statewide.

The report is available electronically at http://www.wastenotnc.org/swhome/SW02-03_AR.htm. For more information, contact Paul Crissman (paul.crissman@ncmail.net) with the Division of Waste Management at (919) 733-0692, or Scott Mouw (scott.mouw@ncmail.net) with the Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance at (919) 715-6512.

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