

The pandemic is a reason to preserve—not pollute—the planet

April 27 2020, by Steve Cohen



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We've already seen the Trump Administration use COVID-19 as an excuse to [stop enforcing environmental laws](#) and there is little question that the pandemic that has all of us under lockdown has driven most other policy issues off of the agenda. In the short run, the sheer desire

for normalcy can and should dominate our thoughts and our actions. But we should be very careful about taking actions that set back the progress we've made toward environmental sustainability and decarbonization. We should never accept the idea that we must trade off environmental protection for economic growth. Both are interdependent: a clean environment is a long-term prerequisite for economic growth, just as we are learning the hard way that economic life is impossible without public health. We are living, organic creatures. Our health requires clean air and water, poison-free food and bodies free of deadly viruses.

Sadly, the move to reduce [environmental protection](#) is not limited to the climate deniers in Washington but extends to the "progressives" running New York City's government. Recently, the de Blasio administration announced the suspension of organics recycling collection and [electronic waste](#) recycling events. Just as the pre-sustainability Bloomberg administration cut recycling to save money when the city suffered from post 9-11 fiscal stress, we see the same response nearly two decades later in City Hall. At that time, Bloomberg's folks had the excuse of not yet understanding sustainability and climate change, it's clear they learned and grew. The current group in charge can't make that claim. Still, it's easy to understand the problem. With little of the city's [waste](#) being created at commercial establishments and therefore collected by private carters, nearly all the garbage we dispose of is now being generated at home, where the Sanitation Department must pick it up. The city has more work to do and a lot less money to spend and so once again, recycling is defined as a "frill." Meanwhile, the private sanitation companies that could help the city maintain recycling are sitting idle and going broke. As for the electronic recycling events, rather than simply cancelling them, an alternative form of collection could have been proposed.

All the work that's been done over the past few years to change people's behavior and get them to separate food and electronic waste from other

garbage is cast aside. This type of decision-making is similar to the type of decision-making that led to the coronavirus crisis in the first place. Government's leaders failed to recognize the importance of preserving the planet and preventing damage to the environment and [public health](#). In China, the disease was not allowed to interfere with the narrative of a communist party conference. In the United States, it was not allowed to interfere with the economic success message of the Trump reelection effort. Scientists try to communicate with these leaders: Medical and public health experts have long warned that a global pandemic was possible. For decades, climate and environmental scientists have detailed the dangers of climate change and toxic contamination. Both are ignored until the impacts predicted begin to be obvious. One can argue that the health impact of the virus is more intense than that of e-waste or food waste, but both the virus and environmental damage harm human health.

We live in a complex, technologically dependent world. The business and public policy decisions that influence our daily life are often made by people with very little understanding or appreciation of science. Ending food and electronics recycling seems like a reasonable act in a crisis, but it sends the signal that these programs are unimportant. The sanitation commissioner and mayor may argue otherwise and call it a short-term, emergency response but actions speak louder than words. Recycling food waste creates sustainable sources of fertilizer and reduces greenhouse gasses. The act of separating food waste from other forms of waste will eventually be automated, but today it requires human behavior. The act of separating waste enhances environmental quality and teaches consumers the fundamentals of the circular economy. Ending electronic waste collection inevitably increases the amounts of toxics in our waste stream. Some of these toxics will end up in our water, food and bodies.

What most concerns me is the absence of analysis and discussion that preceded both EPA's decision to stop enforcing environmental rules and

New York City's cutback of recycling. Those decisions may not have the short-term impact of the CDC's, FDA's and HHS's incompetence in responding to the coronavirus, but the cause is similar. The science of environmental quality and virus transmission took a back seat to political and economic considerations. Decision-making reflects priorities and values. Some information is considered more important than other information. In the case of New York City's recycling program, the volume of recycled waste per household is lower than mixed waste and so the cost of collecting recycled waste is higher. Less waste is collected at each stop, but the cost of the equipment and labor is the same. Collecting material for recycling is more expensive than collecting regular garbage. Added to that is the increased volume of household waste during the pandemic and the answer to City Hall was obvious: food recycling must be sacrificed. On the other hand, as noted earlier, the city might have tried to make use of private waste carters to help out. These private companies need business. The federal government seems to be throwing money at some small businesses these days. Perhaps mutual self-interest could have generated a deal. Instead, I saw a sign in my building's basement ending food waste recycling in early May and resuming it in June of 2021.

The pandemic should be teaching us all about the dangers of ignoring science and the risks posed by our interconnected, high tech, global economy. We are more than willing to make use of the benefits of that economy but are unwilling to take the steps needed to protect ourselves and our planet from its inevitable byproducts. We may not understand how it works, but we don't question the science of the iPhone. There are no smartphone deniers. But the science of climate change, pollution and disease seems unpleasant and therefore considered by some to be subject to "belief:" "Do you believe in [climate change](#)? Do you believe that COVID-19 is any worse than the flu?" What's next—do you believe in gravity? Questions of scientific facts become issues of values and beliefs. The lesson of this pandemic is that we need to include scientific

fact, models, theory and analysis into routine private management and public policy decision-making.

This is not to say that scientific expertise should determine public policy. Sometimes we must balance values against each other. The risk of COVID-19 will need to be balanced against the value of re-opening the economy. But that analysis should be conducted by grownups and include a careful analysis of all factors in play. In a democracy, it should include an open, transparent discussion of facts and values and of costs and benefits. The risk of ending electronic waste and organic collection may not seem as critical as taking action on a pandemic, but the difference is one of degree rather than kind. My concern here is the mindset or paradigm from which decisions are made. New York City's decision to eliminate these forms of [recycling](#) was made without a transparent, reasoned public discussion. It was never allowed to reach the political agenda. President Trump's casual dismissal of the threat posed by COVID-19 was a similar effort to delegitimize the issue and eliminate it from the policy agenda. EPA's nonenforcement of environmental laws was simply an ideologically induced policy waiting for an excuse. The pandemic should be teaching us the importance of public health, environmental protection and scientific analysis; which should lead us to preserve rather than pollute the planet.

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