

Why Good Data Matters

Several months ago Dovetail published a report about steel recycling that revealed that commonly reported recycling statistics substantially overstate the percentage of end-of-life steel that is actually recycled. In response, one Dovetail observer questioned whether we weren't stepping rather far from our area of expertise. Perhaps they felt this way because we generally focus on renewable materials, or perhaps they even felt our conclusions were unwarranted. Regardless of why the question was raised, we wanted to respond to that inquiry openly and to discuss our reasoning behind the report.

It is difficult to evaluate any material in isolation, as most materials today are being compared to each other either as to their relative "greenness" in general or their impact on climate change specifically. The most credible approach to these comparisons is through the use of Life Cycle Assessment (LCA), a process we have discussed at length previously and one that also forms the basis of globally accepted Environmental Product Declarations (EPDs).

We believe that a core strength of Dovetail Partners is our ability to search and interpret scientific literature, bringing credible science to bear in investigation of various claims and issues. We are particularly interested in exposing and challenging misinformation. In this case, the oft-claimed steel recycling percentages have a material impact on life cycle assessment (LCA) results. The use of inaccurate data in LCAs can inadvertently lead to decisions that have an unnecessarily large impact on the environment. Thus, accurate recycling rates in general, and recycling rates of steel in particular are critically important.

As we discussed in the report, the reality regarding the rate of steel recycling is far from what is commonly claimed by industry sources. Thus, virtually all of the LCA studies of steel construction and construction products conducted to date significantly understate the environmental impacts of producing and using steel products, making such products look far better in environmental comparisons than they actually are. It is a problem that needs to be corrected in future assessments.

The steel industry plays a critical role in our society, and the recycling of steel is an important and beneficial activity. Misinformation about steel recycling benefits no one. We must be sure the tools designed to aid us in making correct, well-informed decisions, relating to material use and the environment, are based on the most accurate data possible. The fact that Dovetail was able to define those discrepancies means increased accuracy is possible. Now we just need to apply pressure to all major material-based associations – steel, concrete, plastic, and wood – to be sure society has the data it needs to make informed decisions. It's clear society is going to

use more steel, more concrete, more plastic, and more wood in the future. Accurate data helps us use the right material for the right use at the right time.

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