



FACILITY WIPES: EFFICIENCY VS. SUSTAINABILITY

A New Future for Facility Waste: Turning Used Cleaning Supplies into Alternative Fuel



Disposable wipes have proven to be critical cleaning tools for facilities when consistency and convenience are paramount. This holds true across numerous segments, whether offices, healthcare, and food service or processing, or even automotive, metallurgy and electronics industries.¹

They serve a vital purpose in providing hygienic, consistent cleaning materials and can be used to complete a variety of tasks from wiping up oil and grease, to drying surfaces, to applying solvents and disinfectants. According to a Smithers report, in 2025 global nonwovens consumption was 16.1 million tons and by 2030, it is estimated to reach 21.5 million tons, at a projected growth rate of 6.2%.²



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Unfortunately, nearly all of these wipes end up in landfills. Approximately 50% of all U.S. municipal solid waste—over 146 million tons per year—still goes into landfills, despite decades of recycling and diversion efforts.³ Reusable textiles such as shop towels and rags also contribute to landfill waste⁴ and may contain hazardous materials that can seep into soil or water or even increase fire risk.⁵ Alarming, the U.S. is facing the very real possibility of running out of landfill capacity in coming years, with some states projected to run out of capacity by 2036.⁶



Beyond capacity issues, landfills also produce methane, a greenhouse gas at least 28 times more potent than CO₂ and may lead to other environmental concerns such as groundwater contamination, odors and potentially harmful health effects on surrounding communities.⁷

One reason for the disposal of wipes into landfills is the residue on the wipe. Dirty wipes are often contaminated with substances that make them poorly suited for standard recycling processes.⁸ Thus, there is a growing need to find alternatives to both recycling and landfill disposal options, particularly when interest in more sustainable industrial and manufacturing practices is steadily rising. In fact, a 2022 Manufacturing Leadership Council study showed that nearly 60% of manufacturing executives believe sustainability is essential to future competitiveness.⁹

The Broader Waste Footprint: More Than Just Wipes

Beyond disposable wipes waste, there are other common cleaning and hygiene products that also end up in landfills, such as dispensers for hand towels, toilet paper, soap and sanitizer, as well as the plastic cartridges that contain soap and sanitizer. Traditionally, the only method to dispose of these items during replacement or renovation is to throw them away. Dispensers are especially bulky and do not break down easily, making them a particularly high-volume addition to landfills.



Skepticism Surrounds the Sustainability “Status Quo”

Given limited landfill capacity and the growing amount of waste being generated in North America, solutions that work are desperately needed. Yet the world of waste management can be both complex and confusing.

“Sustainability” is a term that covers a wide umbrella of ideas. When it comes to environmental sustainability, words like circularity, landfill diversion, waste-to-energy, recycling, carbon footprint, greenhouse gases, clean energy, emissions, reduced packaging, extended producer responsibility, composting, “wishcycling,” greenwashing and microplastics are commonly encountered in global news stories and corporate initiatives. These terms are commonly used, yet key differences can be misunderstood. Compounding the risk of confusion is the fact that as corporations and small businesses have sought to become more environmentally sustainable, public trust in these sustainability efforts has eroded. According to The Recycling Partnership’s “State of Recycling” report, only 21% of residential recyclable materials are being recycled, 76% of residential recyclable materials are lost at the household level and only 43% of households participate in recycling at all.¹⁰ A global survey conducted by the World Economic Forum indicated that North Americans tend to be more skeptical about environmental issues compared to other parts of the world and North Americans also cite a lack of trust in recycling programs as a barrier to recycling more often than some other parts of the world.¹¹

Credibility Is at Stake When Implementation Falls Short

A recent study performed by Veolia which surveyed 245 large firms across 11 industries found that over half of these companies appeared to be at risk of not meeting their five and ten-year sustainability commitments “because they don’t have actionable plans with specific initiatives identified to reach their goals.”¹² The study also estimated that nearly 3 in 4 large companies will have established a zero waste-to-landfill goal within the next few years. One interesting insight from this report was that, in many cases, those who set sustainability strategies and goals were rarely responsible for implementing the steps to achieve those goals. This highlights an opportunity area for manufacturers of products such as disposable wipes to bridge the gap by offering programs that help their customers minimize landfill waste.¹²



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Alternative Fuel Lights a New Path to Sustainability

While companies' lack of transparency and their inability to live up to their goals is certainly dismaying, companies today have a new sustainability solution that not only improves transparency, but also helps in progressing toward their zero waste-to-landfill targets. That solution is AEF, or Alternative Engineered Fuels, or more simply, "Alternative Fuel." With this solution, qualified waste is diverted from landfill and converted into alternative fuel (AEF) through a process of shredding and mixing a variety of waste products to create an alternative to fossil fuels and natural gas. The AEF can be burned in cement kilns, thereby reducing emissions as compared to coal.¹³ Currently, fuel combustion accounts for roughly 30% of cement product emissions. In the United States, an average of only 15% of cement kiln energy demand is met by alternative fuel, lagging far behind the 50% usage of alternative fuels by European plants, highlighting the potential for large adoption expansion in this area.¹³

Alternative fuels replace natural gas coal and petroleum coke, allowing for reduction of pollution from fossil fuels and a lowering of net greenhouse gas production. **Because this fuel type cuts greenhouse gas emissions by 54% compared to coal—the primary energy source for the U.S. cement industry¹⁴—it provides a significant emissions advantage.**

Air pollutant amounts may be lowered as well.^{15,7} Furthermore, any ash created as part of burning AEF is directly incorporated into the "cement clinker" (the intermediate product of cement) so that virtually all residual ash is diverted from landfill.⁷

Thrive™: Simplifying Sustainability for Facilities

In seeking to live up to its promise of Better Care for a Better World, Kimberly-Clark Professional (KCP) has forged an exciting new path in sustainability by offering a service where a range of its own qualified products and dispensers* can be converted into alternative fuel. This new KCP solution, Thrive™, is specifically designed to address waste streams that are particularly difficult or impossible to recycle through traditional methods. Thrive™ takes used, qualified products* such as plastic dispensers, skincare cartridges and wipes and turns them into AEF via a hassle-free, fully traceable service that makes it easy for customers to quantify, track and precisely report out landfill diversion metrics.



What Makes Thrive™ Different: Transparency, Traceability and Trust

Thrive™ allows customers the opportunity to have full visibility to the diversion process by using customer and site-specific tracking numbers that are monitored within a sophisticated software tracking system. Customers can see monthly reports on pounds of material diverted from landfill at the location level, meaning that leaders can better understand how specific locations are implementing the program to better target adoption behaviors. The Thrive™ team at Kimberly-Clark Professional also builds confidence and trust with customers by helping set them up for success at the floor level through site walks to improve process flow as well as frequent check-ins to solve any collection or shipping issues.

Give Your Cleaning Supplies a Second Life with Thrive™

Kimberly-Clark Professional invites you to learn how your waste can be more than just another pile in a landfill. Today's waste can be tomorrow's source of energy.

If you would like to learn more about the Thrive™ program, please visit KCProfessional.com/thrive.

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* Qualifying wipes, skin care and dispensers are eligible for landfill diversion so long as after use they are non-hazardous as classified by federal, state and local regulations.