

Californians throwing away less trash

By Deborah Sullivan Brennan, San Diego Union-Tribune

Californians trimmed their trash to a record low last year, according to state figures showing that residents discarded an average of 4.3 pounds per day of garbage last year.

That's down from the previous low of 4.4 pounds per person per day in 2011, according to the Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, known as CalRecycle. By comparison Californians tossed more than eight pounds per person each day in 1989 – the year the state's Integrated Waste Management Act went into effect.

The waste average represents the total trash disposed statewide – 29.3 million tons last year – divided by the state's population of 37.7 million for 2012.

The figure represents industrial and commercial waste as well as household garbage. So the per person average includes not only what individuals throw away, but also the garbage tossed by factories, construction sites and retail establishments.

The state average has fluctuated since the waste management act went into effect, hovering at 6 pounds or more per day for the decade between 1997 and 2006. With the collapse of the housing bubble trash production fell as well, dropping to 5.7 in 2007 and declining each year after that.

“As the economy slowed, you had less consumption, less construction, or less waste produced,” Mark Oldfield, spokesman for the Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, said. “One of the challenges moving forward will be, as the economy continues to improve, how do we continue the strides we've taken while reducing greater amounts of waste?”

Curbside recycling has helped divert trash, while an increasing variety of plastic and other materials can be recycled. Organic waste, including food scraps and lawn trimmings, make up the biggest component of the waste stream, Oldfield said, so large-scale composting will be a high priority.

“As we move forward, organics and food waste will be low-hanging fruit,” he said.