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CONTACT: Jenny Gitlitz, CRI Research Dir., Dalton, MA (413) 684.4746  
Pat Franklin, CRI Executive Dir., Washington, DC (703) 276.9800  
Glenn Switkes, IRN Latin America Dir., São Paulo, Brazil 011.55.11.3822.4157  
Peter Bosshard, IRN Policy Dir., Berkeley, CA (510) 848.1155

## **The Aluminum Can's Dirty Little Secret: On-going Environmental Harm Outpaces the Metal's "Green" Benefits**

WASHINGTON, DC (May 17, 2006) Industry "greenwashing" obscures the real environmental costs of aluminum production, according to the Container Recycling Institute (CRI) and the International Rivers Network (IRN), two non-profit environmental organizations.

According to CRI executive director Pat Franklin, optimistic data released yesterday by the Aluminum Association, an industry trade group, has a dark side. "The Association reported an increase of less than one percentage point in the national aluminum can recycling rate from 51.2 to 52.0 percent," she said, "but they failed to mention that we still are trashing 800,000 tons of aluminum beverage cans a year." Franklin said this was equivalent to the annual output of 3-4 major primary aluminum smelters.

"Frankly, I was surprised to see how slight the increase was, given the record-breaking prices for scrap aluminum cans in 2005," she noted, adding that the actual number of cans collected last year (51.4 billion) was 100 million fewer than the number collected in 2004 (51.5 billion).

The beverage and aluminum industries tout the can as "the most recyclable" package in America, said Jennifer Gitlitz, CRI research director. "But recyclable doesn't necessarily mean recycled. More than half of the 99 billion cans sold in the U.S. last year were landfilled or incinerated." Gitlitz said a similar amount wasn't recycled in other countries, for a global total of about 1.5 million tons of wasted cans.

"These trashed cans must be replaced with new cans made entirely from virgin materials," Gitlitz said, "and that is where the environmental damage occurs."

She cited bauxite mining and processing as a major source of water pollution. "Each ton of aluminum cans requires 5 tons of bauxite ore to be strip-mined, crushed, washed, and refined into alumina before it is smelted," she explained. "The process creates about 5 tons of caustic red mud residues which can seep into surface and groundwater," said Gitlitz. People and animals have suffered from the effects of bauxite mining in Jamaica, Brazil, Australia, and other tropical areas, she noted.

"We're talking about immense energy consumption," said Gitlitz. "3% of the electricity generated worldwide goes to aluminum. While aluminum companies often cite big savings from recycling, they fail to mention that at current wasting levels, about 23 billion kilowatt-hours are squandered globally each year through 'replacement production.' About 7 kWh are saved per pound (33 cans) recycled. Had the billions of cans trashed been recycled, the electricity saved could power 1.3 million American homes."

According to the International Aluminum Institute, about a third of the primary aluminum produced worldwide uses coal-generated electricity, 10% relies on oil and natural gas-fired electricity generation, 5% is nuclear powered, and about half uses hydroelectricity (dams). In total, the industry's annual electricity consumption is almost 300 billion kilowatt-hours, or about 3% of the world's total electricity consumption

Much of the electricity used by the industry is available at below-market prices. According to Glenn Switkes, Latin America director of the Berkeley-based International Rivers Network, "Aluminum companies are relocating to the tropics because governments in developing countries are providing them with subsidized hydroelectricity. These dams have irreversible impacts on biodiversity, and displace thousands of riverbank dwellers and indigenous peoples." Aluminum companies are the principal force behind the Brazilian government's plans to dam the major rivers of the Amazon, he said.

"Valuable ecosystems on every continent have been destroyed for the convenience of the aluminum industry and consumers," added Peter Bosshard, Policy Director of International Rivers Network. "Hydropower dams linked to aluminum smelters have flooded vast tracts of land, displaced tens of thousands of people, and created unsustainable debt burdens for poor countries." He cited the Karahnjukar Dam in Eastern Iceland and the Akosombo Dam in Ghana as two particularly egregious examples of destructive dam-and-aluminum projects.

Another dirty secret, according to CRI, is aluminum's contribution to climate change. About 95 million tons of greenhouse gases were produced by the global aluminum industry in 2005.

"While the industry as a whole has made laudable technical improvements to reduce greenhouse emissions for each ton of primary aluminum produced," Gitlitz said, "it has consistently failed to eliminate the portion of greenhouse gasses that come from replacing 1.5 million tons of trashed cans with new ones made from virgin materials--that is to say--from bauxite and electricity."

Primary aluminum smelting also generates sulfur dioxide and nitrogen oxide emissions, which are contributors to smog and acid rain. "Had the cans wasted in 2005 been recycled," Gitlitz said, "they would have avoided the emission of 75,000 tons of SO<sub>x</sub> and NO<sub>x</sub>."

"The Aluminum Association's press release is about the national average aluminum can recycling rate," Franklin observed. "But the eleven U.S. states with beverage container deposit laws (or 'bottle bills') recycle 75-95% of cans all sold. States without deposits only recycle 35% of cans sold. This means that there is already a realistic policy option to combat container waste, but it has not been adopted more widely due to industry lobbying, public relations, and lip service. The beverage industry spends millions each year to combat deposit legislation, while we continue to trash 5 out of every 10 cans sold. If container and beverage producers won't accept responsibility for managing their can waste, Americans need to ask their state legislators to do the job," Franklin said.

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Headquartered in Washington, DC, the Container Recycling Institute is a non-profit (501c3) organization that analyzes beverage container sales, recycling, and wasting trends, and advocates policy measures to increase recycling and reduce the environmental damages from container production and disposal.

Headquartered in Berkeley, CA, the International Rivers Network protects rivers and defends the rights of communities that depend on them. IRN opposes destructive dams and the development model they advance, and encourages better ways of meeting people's needs for water, energy and protection from destructive floods.

For more background information, see the CRI report, *Trashed Cans: the Global Environmental Impacts of Aluminum Can Wasting in America*, a free download:

[http://www.container-recycling.org/alum\\_facts.htm#reports](http://www.container-recycling.org/alum_facts.htm#reports)

and the IRN report, *Foiling the Aluminum Industry: A Toolkit for Communities, Activists, Consumers, and Workers*, available at: <http://www.irn.org/programs/aluminum/index.php?id=archive/Foiling2005.html>