



Resources That Need a Ride

Circular Economy Development Center, Colorado: Case Study

Businesses in rural Colorado communities have significant amounts of film and flexible packaging, but not enough resources to transport them to recyclers. Colorado's EPR program — slated to begin implementation in 2026 — offers potential for the material to be included in universal recycling, but near-term investment is needed to solve logistics and challenges within the system today to better prepare for future program requirements. The Circular Economy Development Center (CEDC) is addressing this gap through its Circular Transportation Network. The network picks up material from small-scale generators for delivery to a central location where they can be processed for sale.

“Transportation can be a big barrier to circularity—just moving materials and getting them from point A to point B,” said Susan Renaud, CEDC’s director of special projects. “At the same time, trucks are hauling deliveries out to all different parts of Colorado and coming back empty. We saw this as an opportunity to do what we call milk runs.”

In partnership with Front Range Transload and B. Kirkland Trucking, the CEDC's “milk runs” arrange for returning delivery trucks to pick up recyclable materials on their way back to a transload facility in Pueblo, a community about a two-hour drive south of Denver.

At the facility, material will be aggregated, baled, and sent to local and regional end markets. A primary end buyer of the material will be Pueblo-based Driven Plastics, which turns post-consumer films into an asphalt additive for roads.

Funding from The Recycling Partnership's Film & Flexibles Recycling Coalition is supporting the purchase of a baler for the primary hub and operational startup funding to support new routes that will eventually serve residential recycling programs in as many as twenty-five (25) participating communities. The grant also supports outreach to potential participants to conduct webinars and other education efforts, partly through nonprofits Recycle Colorado.

“The goal of this program is to show whether the revenue a material brings in can pay for transportation,” said CEDC Director Laurie Johnson. The trucking network receives the material at no cost in exchange for free transport. So far, the CEDC is working with both individual businesses and municipalities that are interested in the pickups.

Johnson said being able to deliver materials in bales, thanks to the purchase of the horizontal baler, will lend higher value to the recycled material; the operational funding, along with the support in education and outreach, is accelerating the program's kickoff.

“We'd love to see other states have circular economy centers like this, because it's fast-tracking a lot of circularity infrastructure and bridging gaps between different sectors,” Johnson said. “This is going to be a really important model to track.”

WHY IT MATTERS

Prototyping effective drop-off film collection, especially in rural areas, is an essential step in building out wider film recycling in Colorado. The CEDC project will explore the key elements of this prototyping including information on costs, the types of material collected, the logistics of collection and transport, the effectiveness of education, market acceptance of the collected film, and what levels of PE film capture that drop-off can deliver. This project can provide a guide for optimizing drop-off performance as part of an integrated strategy with multiple collection scenarios, with potential use cases in EPR programs under development in policy states.

