

THE RECYCLING PARTNERSHIP

Hearing on “Responding to the Challenges Facing Recycling in the United States”

Statement for the Record

Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

June 17, 2020

Elizabeth Biser
Vice President, Policy & Public Affairs
The Recycling Partnership

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a statement into the official hearing record for the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works’ hearing “Responding to the Challenges Facing Recycling in the United States.”

[The Recycling Partnership](#) is a national nonprofit that works with companies, communities, and policymakers across the nation to strengthen public recycling programs. Our organization puts private dollars to work in communities because we know that when we invest in a system that creates jobs, feeds manufacturing, protects resources, empowers sustainable action, and unlocks opportunity, everyone wins.

We applaud the Committee for holding a hearing that focuses on the important issues relating to recycling in the United States. Americans realize how critical recycling is to our economy and our environment; 85% of Americans strongly believe in recycling according to a [recent survey commissioned by The Recycling Partnership](#). Citizens across the country depend on community recycling programs to be able to exercise this strong desire to recycle. Unfortunately, high costs and difficult markets for some materials pose significant challenges to community recycling programs. This statement provides a snapshot of the economic value of recycling, describes the current challenges we see facing communities, and then provides recommendations of actions that Congress can take to help.

Recycling is an economic driver. According to the EPA, recycling and reuse activities contribute to 757,000 U.S. jobs. When we recycle, materials are sorted and processed back into raw materials that can be made into new products. There are jobs created at each point of this process, along with economic investment made by recycling and processing companies.

Community recycling programs deliver this essential feedstock to U.S. manufacturers, many of whom could not make their products without this critical supply. Toilet paper, cardboard

delivery boxes, packaging for food and medical supplies, and many other items critical to the response to the COVID-19 pandemic are made from recycled materials. In short, large sectors in our economy and the environment depend on community recycling programs and associated infrastructure to make and deliver those goods to market and keep them out of landfills.

However, the ability of community recycling programs to sustain and grow the supply of recyclable materials is facing significant challenges. In many areas of the U.S., communities are paying [substantially more to send curbside-collected recyclables to a sortation facility](#) than to a landfill for disposal — sometimes more than twice as much. Communities are also experiencing impacts to their local budgets from the pandemic, presenting challenges around the financing of key services, including recycling. Nevertheless, many cities are persevering through these challenges because citizens so strongly support recycling programs.

As we work hand-in-hand with communities across America, The Recycling Partnership has demonstrated proven solutions that help communities provide more, effective recycling programs in light of these challenges. These solutions include ensuring citizens have automatic access to recycling, that citizens are using the most efficient means of material collection and making sure that citizens are educated on what and how to properly recycle.

We maintain robust data on our work and know that these strategies improve the quantity and quality of materials collected. For example, The Recycling Partnership's [anti-contamination campaign in Atlanta](#) saw a 57% decrease in unwanted materials in recycling carts when education was paired with engagement methods such as cart-tagging. Using cart-based collection increases the amount of materials by more than 100 pounds per household. Decreasing contamination improves the quality and increases the value of the material collected, better helping offset the costs of recycling programs.

Congress can act to bolster the recycling system by action in some key areas: supporting better data collection, enhancing education, and facilitating infrastructure investment.

Data: 2020 Recycling Data Efforts

Strong data is the foundation of all smart policy solutions. For too long, recycling in the United States has been characterized by its lack of reliable, comprehensive data. There is not enough data on how many community recycling programs currently operate in the U.S., much less the amount of recyclable material that is collected and processed from residential homes. The Recycling Partnership urges Congress to appropriate \$5 million to the EPA to conduct a comprehensive data collection effort that we have termed the “2020 Recycling Census.” That effort outlines the metrics needed to have informed conversations about the state of recycling in the United States, to craft effective solutions for increasing the efficient collection and processing of recyclable materials, to strengthen recycling markets, and to measure the effectiveness and progress of efforts moving forward against a meaningful benchmark.

Education: RECYCLE Act (S. 2491)

Federal support for recycling education and outreach is critical. Education and optimization efforts increase the quality and quantity of materials collected, helping ensure the flow of essential feedstocks to U.S. manufacturers. Supporting legislation such as the recently introduced Senate measure, the RECYCLE Act (S. 2491) would go a long way towards addressing this critical need.

Infrastructure: RECOVER Act (H.R. 5115)

The speed of packaging innovation has outpaced the capabilities of our recovery infrastructure. Important innovations are occurring in the U.S. regarding circular packaging design, including the sortation and processing of recyclables, but we need these technologies to accelerate and be adopted on a broad scale. This includes homegrown, high-tech solutions such as artificial intelligence and robotics from companies like AMP Robotics from Denver or BHS from Eugene, Oregon. Incentives and grants, such as what is offered in the RECOVER Act (H.R. 5115), will drive broad-scale adoption of the necessary infrastructure investments for improved collection, sortation, and processing of recyclables.

COVID-19 Recycling Resiliency Proposal

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, The Recycling Partnership has proposed that \$100 million be appropriated to EPA to allocate to states through competitive grants for recycling-related infrastructure to address immediate needs related to the resilience of the collection, sortation, and separation of recyclable materials. This funding would ensure continuity of operations and the delivery of high-quality recycled feedstock for use in domestic manufacturing.

We are facing a challenge that requires public, private, and nonprofit partners to work together and transition from simply fixing problems to looking at the possibilities of a circular economy future. It's a future where we no longer bury valuable materials, but instead put these materials to work for our economy, creating new jobs and protecting our environment. Congress can be a consequential actor on these issues, and we urge attention to the opportunities we have suggested.

Thank you for allowing us to submit this statement to the hearing record. We look forward to working with you on solutions that create jobs and protect our planet and its people.