

THE RECYCLING PARTNERSHIP

Hearing on “Strengthening Community Recycling Programs: Challenges and Opportunities”

Testimony before the

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Madam Chairwoman, members of the Committee – thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this afternoon.

We’re here today because you are hearing from your constituents about how critical recycling is to our environment and our economy. You’re also hearing from communities who are struggling with higher costs and difficult markets. I’ll share a snapshot with you of the current challenges we see facing communities, then provide recommendations of actions Congress can take to help.

The Recycling Partnership is a national nonprofit that works with companies and communities across the nation to strengthen public recycling programs. Our mission is to ensure that every American can recycle as easily as they can throw something away.

Our organization values its public-sector partners, including cities, state agencies and the EPA. Assistant Administrator Wright, I’d like to thank EPA for the work you’ve undertaken to bring together a diverse set of stakeholders around how to strengthen education, markets, infrastructure and measurement.

Recycling is facing some challenges right now, but in these challenges lies opportunity.

Local governments are on the front lines of recycling. We’ve all seen the news stories about recycling programs shuttering due to rising contract costs. While the numbers are not as dire as is sometimes reported – at last count, there were approximately 60 – mostly small – cities who dropped their programs – communities are seeing their costs rising at an alarming rate.

We have a problem when it is so much cheaper for cities to landfill than it is for them to recycle. Communities, on average, pay more than double to send materials to a Material Recovery Facility versus the landfill, and many lack critical operating funds. Yet, many cities are

persevering through this market downturn because citizens so strongly support recycling programs. In polling we commissioned last April, we found that 84 percent of citizens see recycling as a valuable public service.

The Recycling Partnership is helping communities improve the effectiveness and efficiency of their programs by providing grants to increase access to recycling, educate citizens, and optimize programs through behavior changing strategies, such as cart-tagging. Contaminated recycling is a significant driver of costs for recycling processors. Our forthcoming State of Curbside Report shows that the national in-bound contamination rate is approximately 17 percent. Cart-tagging engages citizens by giving them feedback if they have items in their carts that are not recyclable. Workers walk ahead of the recycling truck, quickly inspect recycling carts, then leave an informative tag to educate the resident on how to recycle correctly. Once the citizen removes what doesn't belong – such as plastic bags – their recycling is re-collected.

These methods work. In a project the Partnership completed in Atlanta, we saw a 57 percent decrease in contamination levels when education was paired with cart-tagging. At the same time, there was a 27 percent increase in good, quality recyclable materials collected.

We are engaging with communities throughout the nation to improve the quality and quantity of materials recycled. Chairwoman McCollum, as you may know, the Recycling Partnership is currently in conversations with Ramsey and Washington counties to provide education and outreach materials as well as in-unit bins to multifamily properties with the goal of increasing participation and reducing contamination.

The quality of materials collected matters because the process of recycling only starts at the curb. Recycling occurs when material is recirculated throughout the economy as feedstock for manufacturing – creating jobs and becoming new products that your constituents buy and use every day. Increasing quality also increases the value of those collected recyclables, better helping offset the costs of recycling programs.

Local governments aren't in this alone. The recycling system is a loosely connected and highly interdependent system of collectors, processors and manufacturers. The ultimate fate of recyclable materials rests in the hands of a broad set of stakeholders who must all do something new and different to support a transition to a circular economy.

Congress can act to bolster the recycling system through supporting data collection, education and outreach, and infrastructure investment.

First, Congress could support efforts to increase the quality of data collected on our recycling system. EPA has a program to help standardize data collection among states. We applaud EPA's efforts in this space and would encourage you to allocate additional resources to the EPA to bolster their existing measurement programs and to support new efforts at the municipal level. Markets work better with strong data. Businesses need to know they have access to a consistent supply in order to rely on material as manufacturing feedstock.

Second, federal support for recycling education and outreach is critical. Education and optimization efforts increase the quality and quantity of materials collected. Legislation such as the recently introduced Senate measure, the RECYCLE Act, S. 2941, which would provide \$15 million per year over 5 years, would go a long way towards addressing this critical need. Citizens need resources to help them understand what and how to recycle materials.

Lastly, we need to invest in infrastructure. The speed of packaging innovation has outpaced the capabilities of our recovery infrastructure. Innovations are occurring in sortation and processing, but we need these technologies to 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, Colorado or BHS from Eugene, Oregon, that will allow us to better sort and clean up recycling at sortation facilities. Broad-scale adoption won't happen without incentives or grants, such as what is offered in the RECOVER Act, HR 5115.

EPA is looking at the right things – the EPA National Framework is bringing stakeholders together to address these difficulties and offer up solutions. Resources are needed and the federal government is in a great position to provide a necessary injection of capital to the system.

The success of our recycling system is also closely tied to the health of our environment. If we recovered all material from single-family homes, it would be the greenhouse gas equivalent of taking 20 million cars off the road each year. The Recycling Partnership's State of Curbside report shows that more than 20 million tons of recyclable materials are disposed of each year. Together, we have a long way to go.

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 and protect our environment. Our planet needs it.

Thank you for inviting The Recycling Partnership to testify before this Subcommittee. We look forward to working with you.