



**WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

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**ON BEHALF OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RECYCLING PROGRAMS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

**BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON INTERIOR, ENVIRONMENT AND RELATED AGENCIES  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

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Chairwoman McCollum, Ranking Member Joyce and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for holding today's hearing on strengthening community recycling programs. On behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the nation's 3,069 counties that we represent, thank you for the opportunity to testify.

My name is Adam Ortiz, and I am the Director of the Department of Environmental Protection for Montgomery County, Maryland. Montgomery County is an urban county with a population of just over one million residents and is the most populous county in the state of Maryland. Located directly northwest of the District of Columbia, my county encompasses 507 square miles. The county has a diverse economy, which includes corporations, research centers and federal government institutions.

Counties across the nation are highly diverse and vary immensely in natural resources, social and political systems, cultural, economic and structural circumstances, public health and environmental responsibilities. Counties range in areas from 26 square miles (Arlington County, Va.) to 87,860 square miles (North Slope Borough, Alaska).

The population of counties varies from Loving County, Texas, with just under 100 residents to Los Angeles County, California, which is home to close to ten million people. Of the nation's 3,069 counties, approximately 70 percent are considered "rural," with populations less than 50,000. Fifty percent of these communities have populations below 25,000. At the same time, there are more than 120 major urban counties, which collectively provide essential services to more than 130 million people every day.

Many county responsibilities are mandated by both the state and the federal government. While county responsibilities differ widely, most states grant their counties significant authorities to fulfill public services. These authorities include construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and critical infrastructure, assessment of property taxes, record keeping, administering elections, and overseeing jails, court systems and public hospitals. Counties are also responsible for child welfare, consumer protection, economic development, employment and workforce training, emergency management, land use planning and zoning.

Among our numerous responsibilities, environmental stewardship is a primary function of county governments to ensure healthy, safe and vibrant communities for our residents. Counties work to ensure a safe and clean environment for our residents by administering solid waste management services and programs. Counties have the authority and the responsibility to undertake solid waste management activities, such as operating waste facilities, recycling centers, residential and commercial waste collection, landfills, combustors and transfer stations. These services are an essential and fundamental role of local government that impacts the lives of Americans each day.

Thank you again for holding a hearing on this important topic as recycling is an increasingly important issue for counties. After spending 15 years in the public sector overseeing waste and recycling programs, I have seen firsthand the significant role local governments play in providing environmental protections by implementing recycling policies.

Today, I will discuss several points for your consideration as the subcommittee assesses challenges and opportunities at the local level to improve the nation's recycling systems:

- 1. County governments play an essential role in the nation's recycling systems, as local governments are the primary provider of waste management services across the country.**
- 2. Due to tighter restrictions on recycled materials, counties have new challenges and opportunities to maintain recycling programs.**
- 3. Counties are taking innovative approaches to improve and sustain the nation's recycling systems.**
- 4. Additional federal guidelines and investments and early, consistent and meaningful engagement with intergovernmental partners are vital in the development and implementation of recycling standards, policies, programs and regulations.**

**First, county governments play an essential role in the nation's recycling systems, as local governments are the primary provider of waste management services across the country.**

As both regulators and regulated entities, counties are responsible for protecting local air, water and land resources through delegated authority for state and federal laws. County administered recycling and resource management policies are critical to minimizing pollution to our natural resources. In 2017, the United States generated 267.8 million tons of municipal solid waste (MSW) or 4.51 pounds per person per day. Of the MSW created, approximately 35.2 percent was recycled or composted, 12.7 percent were combusted with energy recovery and the majority (52.1 percent) were landfilled.

Management of municipal solid waste and recycling is a significant operation that relies heavily on local governments. In 2016, counties spent \$22 billion on sewage and solid waste management alone.

Counties often provide curbside recycling collection, drop-off centers and educational resources to make recycling easier for residents and businesses. Once collected, counties are tasked with processing the waste, which includes sorting, transporting and selling recycled goods to buyers.

Recycling policies and practices vary immensely between counties because there is no federal law mandating recycling; states and local governments must administer their recycling requirements. County governments are required to meet their state's recycling standards and regulations but are also able to set additional standards that go further.

In Montgomery County, we provide several recycling services to make recycling accessible for our residents. We distribute multiple types of recycling bins, offering curbside and drop-off recycling. Our recycling system consists of dual-stream recycling, which separates waste comprised of fiber component — paper and cardboard — from containers, including glass, plastic and cans. This approach lowers levels of contamination, increases the quality and value of recovered materials and lowers the cost to the county for processing the collected recyclables.

Through these services, Montgomery County has achieved an overall recycling rate of 61 percent – for residential and businesses combined. With further upgrades to our recycling system, we believe the county can achieve a 75 percent recycling rate by 2030.

Though my time in the public sector has primarily been in urban settings, it's important to emphasize that successful recycling programs are not limited to largely populated counties. Through strategic policies and investments, rural counties have increased recycling rates.

Emmet County, Mich. is a rural county with a population of 33,000. The county offers curbside collection services to about 60 percent of its residents and operates 13 recycling drop-off sites. In total, 80 percent of county residents participate in the program, and as a result, Emmet County has a recycling rate of 40 percent, five percent higher than the national average.

The county began making investments to improve recycling efforts in the 1990s through state grants; a voter-approved, two-year dedicated recycling tax; community engagement and education. When the recycling market was at its peak, the county invested in new technology and infrastructure to improve the county's recycling efforts and expanded recycling collection services to communities outside the county. Today, the program is mostly self-sufficient from revenues through the sale of recycled materials and user fees.

Regardless of urban or rural communities, local recycling programs are crucial to minimizing pollution, but it is expensive to operate. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), an efficient curbside recycling program can cost anywhere from \$50 to more than \$150 per ton, in addition to the cost of operating trash collection.

Recycling services and programs are primarily financed by revenue streams from the sale of recycled materials and user fees assessed to residents and businesses using the services. This creates a significant challenge if the recycling market drastically slowed, which is what we are experiencing today.

**Second, due to tighter restrictions on recycled materials, counties have new challenges and opportunities to maintain recycling programs.**

County-run recycling programs are more likely to be successful if the recycled materials collected are profitable. If the program can become self-funded through revenue and user fees, counties can continue to improve recycling services and potentially expand their services to wider markets.

Unfortunately, counties currently face a dismal marketplace that is valuing recycled materials at historic lows. For example, the national average of sorted mixed papers, such as newspapers, magazines and writing paper, is being traded at roughly \$10 per ton. Two years ago, the same products were trading at \$104 per ton. The national average price for sorted, baled aluminum cans is trading at 55.44 cents per pound, compared to 75.81 cents per pound one year ago. This extreme level of devaluation of recycled goods has created serious challenges for county recycling programs and our ability to remain sustainable.

The reason for the drastic drop in prices is due to China's recent crackdown on imported recycled goods. China is the world's largest importer of solid waste and had recently imported 70 percent of the United States' total plastic recyclables. However, in January 2018, China disrupted the global recycling market by prohibiting imports with more than 0.5 percent contamination for 24 types of recycled materials. These restrictions have prevented the vast majority of U.S. recycled waste from being exported to China, causing domestic markets to be oversaturated with recycled materials. As a result, the price for recyclables have plummeted, impacting counties nationwide.

County governments are left with few options to offset the decrease in revenue to maintain recycling programs. Some counties have raised user fees, cutback on services or suspended recycling services entirely.

In Blaine County, Idaho, County officials stopped collecting mixed paper recycling because the waste was too contaminated and essentially worthless. Blaine County's mixed-paper recycling was considered to be 90 percent clean, but due to tighter restriction, the paper mill would not purchase the mixed-paper unless it was 99 percent clean. Ultimately, the county commission decided to stop collecting mixed paper, resulting the waste to be landfilled or burned.

Similarly, in Kent County, Mich., the board of commissioners moved to double recycling fees after recycling revenues fell by \$1 million. Prior to China's restrictions, Kent County, Mich. was able to sell one ton of mixed paper for \$85 per ton. Today, the county is selling their mixed paper at less than \$5 per ton.

Lastly, in Oregon, Douglas County was forced to suspend all recycling services as a result of fiscal constraints. The county contracted recycling services through a private company; however, as a result of fiscal impacts stemming from China's regulations, the contractor adjusted their pricing upward to \$165 per ton collected, causing the county to temporarily suspend all recycling services and only operate trash collection while a more fiscally appropriate solution is identified.

China's actions have also lowered the price of our commodities for my county, which creates additional challenges and considerations. At the local level, we are looking toward innovative solutions to address the needs of our communities. Today's challenges should be viewed as an opportunity to fix problems and inconsistencies and buildout a robust and sustainable recycling system throughout the country.

**Third, counties are taking innovative approaches to improve and sustain the nation's recycling systems.**

Nationwide, counties have been negatively impacted as a result of China's tighter restrictions, but these challenges do not have to be long-term. Through consistent, sustained investments in recycling infrastructure and technology, education and strategic community outreach, counties are setting the standard for successful recycling practices.

In Montgomery County, we are dedicated to maintaining a clean commodity stream to provide as much value as possible, while also ensuring the cost-effectiveness of our recycling program. We are currently in the process of updating our recycling systems to meet China's updated recycling standards. We are expanding food scrap

composting to reduce food waste and making further investments in sorting technologies, including robotic and optical sorting.

Robotic sorting uses artificial intelligence-assisted robotic technology to sort recyclables from waste. Robots are guided by cameras and computers system to recognize specific objects. Similarly, optical sorting is the automated process of sorting solid products using cameras and/or lasers. Depending on the types of sensors used and the software-driven intelligence of the image processing system, optical sorters can recognize objects' color, size, shape, structural properties and chemical composition.

Further advancements in recycling technologies will improve the quality of recycled materials nationwide. However, it is important to acknowledge that most counties in America are not in a financial position to make large, initial investments to build new recycling infrastructure, update exiting infrastructure or purchase costly technology. As a result, counties are using educational and community outreach initiatives to educate the public on proper recycling practices.

Educating the public is a critical component of a successful recycling program. Thoughtful and strategic recycling campaigns can better educate the public on recycling, boost participation and, consequently, reduce solid waste contamination.

Through public outreach efforts, Del Norte County, Calif. – population of 27,000 – is raising awareness of county recycling services. The county offers free recycling drop-off services at the county's transfer station and charges reduced rates for source-separated recyclable materials (e.g., metals, brush, untreated wood, carpet). Additionally, the transfer station provides sequential unloading of recyclable materials and re-weighting of vehicles. To publicize these services, the county implemented a radio campaign on local radio stations.

The improvement and of our nation's solid waste management requires thoughtful policies. Counties play a major role in developing and administering those polices to improving the nation's recycling systems is substantial. To assist in our efforts, counties need a strong federal partner.

**Lastly, federal buy-in and early, consistent and meaningful engagement with intergovernmental partners is vital in the development and implementation of recycling policies, programs and regulations.**

Congress plays a key role in developing policies that not only guide our actions at the local level but have a major impact on municipal waste management systems.

Counties can provide our federal partners with data to help inform the decision-making process. For example, many counties are responsible for developing solid waste management plans. These professionally developed documents contain important socioeconomic, geographic and scientific data that may be beneficial to state and federal agencies. By using this readily available data, the federal government is better enabled to draft regulations that meet the needs of local communities while also ensuring meaningful environmental protections.

As county officials, we are the level of government closest to the people and directly accountable to our constituents. As a result, meaningful consultation with counties and local governments early and often in the legislative and rulemaking process is imperative to reduce the risk of unfunded mandates and produce more pragmatic and successful strategies for implementing federal policies, including any around recycling and hazardous waste.

For intergovernmental consultation to be truly meaningful, Congress and federal agencies must engage state and local governments as partners, who actively participate in the planning, development and implementation of federal rules. The federal government should recognize the decision-making role and responsibilities of local governments specifically as they are related to land use and MSW disposal.

As with any potentially new policy, program or regulation, counties believe we should have a seat at the table as provisions that may impact our ability to serve our residents are crafted. We must have a robust federal-state-local partnership that preserves local decision-making as any legislation is promulgated around services that are a function of county government.

Counties make decisions to ensure environmentally and fiscally sound solid waste management practices are implemented. We believe that MSW management should continue to be a primary responsibility of state and local governments; however, a strong federal partner is also needed to expand recycling services nationwide and to bring our local recycling programs up to a standard that could be replicated.

NACo urges the committee to provide direct, flexible federal funding options to local governments that can be used to provide services like MSW and recycling programs at the local level. New competitive grant programs authorized and appropriated at the federal level would facilitate the ability of counties to provide recycling services that ultimately lead to a cleaner environment for all Americans.

We recommend a national integrated waste management system that incorporates the following elements: waste reduction, recycling, waste recycling and waste disposal. Counties support a comprehensive waste management system that permits local governments to select among a variety of options to protect the environment, meet local needs in cost-effective manner and avoid undue financial hardship on counties, including through favorable tax policies to finance solid waste management facilities.

Counties suggest establishing federal guidance around which types of plastics are recyclable to facilitate the processing of MSW and recycled goods more efficiently and at a lower cost to the county. While many products have the easily-identified “recycling triangle”, indicating that item may be recycled, plastic #6 – a class of polystyrene plastics that include Styrofoam – has a recycling triangle and cannot be recycled in the vast majority of systems, including in Montgomery County. Setting national standards on which plastics can be recycled and subsequently labeling those products correctly will reduce the local cost of administering MSW and recycling programs.

NACo asks this committee to fully fund programs that help develop and implement programs at the local level to educate, prevent and mitigate illegal dumping.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, counties stand ready to work with Congress and our federal agency partners to develop policies that can help streamline our nation's recycling programs, improve our environment, sustain our economy and ensure the resiliency of our local communities. Federal policies and programs developed with meaningful consultation with state and local partners strengthens the ability of local governments to fulfill our responsibilities to our residents.

Counties continue to serve as reliable partners in implementing federal regulations and policies to meet our shared federal, state and local goals and protect our residents. Counties look forward to further strengthening the intergovernmental partnership around recycling to create healthy, vibrant communities for all Americans.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify on this important topic.