

Plastics Recycling in the USA – by the Numbers



Improving national recycling infrastructure will strengthen the circular plastics economy and ensure communities and consumers reap the benefits.

Improving nationwide recycling by increasing investments in infrastructure supports a circular economy, and leverages plastics’ potential for reuse while keeping waste out of the environment. A recent [study](#) by the United States National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) found that in addition to decreasing plastic waste, a **fully circular plastics economy could save the United States up to \$9.9 billion** annually.

Recovering and recycling plastic products saves energy and valuable materials

Plastic products belong in a circular economy where they can be reused and transformed into new products. [Advanced](#) and [traditional recycling](#) systems are complementary and crucial for recovery and reuse—ensuring plastics are diverted from landfills and find second lives as [new products](#).



In 2019, the energy value of plastic waste in landfills **could have powered 5% of the U.S. transportation sector**.



Recycling one ton of redirected post-consumer plastic waste saves 5,774 kilowatt hours (Kwh) of energy—enough to power **57 electric vehicles**.



Manufacturing one ton of plastic containers with recycled PET saves 7,200 Kwh of energy—enough to **power the average U.S. home for over 8 months**.

Recycling is more challenging at the state level without a national definition for recycling

The U.S. government has mainly depended on local and state governments to enact their own waste management and recycling definitions and strategies. With no federal laws defining recycling, states and even counties are left with a [patchwork of inconsistent legislation, policies, and infrastructure](#) that can do more harm than good. Ultimately, consumers, producers and the broader economy often bear the brunt of this challenge.



Limited funding forces local governments to make tradeoffs in community recycling.



Lacking public funding for curbside collection, residents of Pasco, West Richland, and Benton County, Washington have to personally bring their recyclables to local [collection sites](#) or material recovery facilities (MRFs).

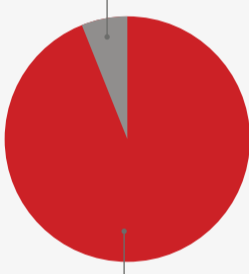


Kennewick, Washington contracts a [private waste collection company](#) for scheduled curbside pickup and sorting of comingled recyclable and nonrecyclable products; the company spreads collection costs across various service regions, something the county can’t do, but only collects certain recyclables.



Even within counties, recycling programs differ, creating confusion over appropriate disposal methods.

[Fairfax County, VA](#) only collects recycling for **10%** of county residents, who have to [petition](#) for the service and pay through county taxes.



90% of Fairfax County residents have their recycling collected by [private recycling companies](#), but the varying procedures and accepted materials across companies creates confusion.

Patchwork aside, recycling saves money

While having a variety of recycling program structures across the country poses its own challenges, the [economic benefit](#) of recycling itself is evident. From job creation and wages to revenue generation from the sale of recyclable waste, recycling plastic goods benefits the economy.



All household waste in [Emmet County, Michigan](#) passes through a high-tech, dual-stream facility where an optical sorter separates the recyclable items from nonrecyclables to sell to Great Lakes-area recycling companies for reuse in new products. In 2021, the county made **over \$2.5 million** from the practice, which was reinvested into county projects.



77% of surveyed New Yorkers support [potential legislation](#) to adopt state advanced recycling practices, which could generate over **\$500 million in economic output** for the state.

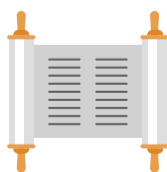
FACT:
If the laws pass, NY will be the 25th state to adopt advanced recycling!

Federal actions provide new hope for improved recycling systems across the U.S.

If the United States recycles **just 5% more** of its plastic waste, over 13 million tons of plastics would be diverted from landfills—but making this a reality requires consistent policies and diligent investment in waste management provisions that enhance our nation’s recycling infrastructure and encourage consumer participation.



In November 2021, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released [Part One of a Series on Building a Circular Economy](#), a start to its National Recycling Strategy to create “a stronger, more resilient, and cost-effective municipal solid waste recycling system.” With ongoing collaboration from industry and government stakeholders, additional installments of the strategy are in development to encourage future investments in economic circularity and waste reduction.



Signed into law in November 2021, the [Bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) included \$350 million in funding for EPA Solid Waste and Recycling Grants to improve nationwide recycling programs and infrastructure.



The [Save Our Seas 2.0 Act](#), which passed in November 2019, provides \$55 million in annual funding to improve [local recycling infrastructure](#) and reduce plastic waste in waterways. Since passage, this legislation has funded international programs to support global reduction in plastic waste, including the [2022 USAID Save our Seas initiative](#), which will support 14 new country- and regional-level programs in key geographies that produce 40% of total global plastic waste.



In the 117th Congress, two bills—the Recycling and Composting Accountability Act (RCAA), [S. 3743](#), and the Recycling Infrastructure and Accessibility Act (RIAA), [S. 3742](#)—were introduced to improve recycling and composting data collection and infrastructure, particularly in underserved communities. While this legislation was not passed last session, the Recycling Infrastructure and Accessibility Act, [S.1189](#), has been reintroduced in the 118th Congress to expand circular economy investments.