

Recycling Reimagined

BUILDING A CIRCULAR ECONOMY

Recycling, composting and other sustainable waste management strategies are crucial to keeping America's cities clean.

Since the 1960s, increased recycling has been one of the most widespread success stories in conservation and sustainability.

Ninety four percent of Americans have access to some type of recycling service(s) and 73 percent have curbside recycling.

As recycling has blossomed into a global industry, flaws in the system have also grown. Inconsistent recycling standards are confusing to residents, and single-stream recycling is leading to high rates of contamination. And Americans continue to generate more and more waste.

A linear economic model is “take, make, waste.” Innovative cities are promoting a circular economy that connects the two ends of the cycle, using waste as a feedstock for production. Efforts to create a more circular economy can preserve resources, create jobs, add economic value, minimize waste and curb greenhouse emissions.

**Source: 2017 ISRI Economic Impact Study*

Recycling by the Numbers

*In 2017, the U.S. recycling and reuse industry accounted for:

534,000

in stable jobs

\$30.6BILL

in wages

\$117BILL

in economic activity

\$8.2BILL

in state, local, and federal tax revenues

Recommendations

The health of our citizens and the safety of our environment depend on sustainable waste management systems. Cities should feel empowered to improve diversion rates and reduce waste. Here's how:

Get to Know Your Waste

Perform waste characterization or composition studies to identify what kinds of materials end up in the landfill. These studies can also be used to determine the material composition of other streams, such as single-stream recycling.

Educate Key Stakeholder

Do continuous outreach and marketing to ensure that residents know what they can recycle. This will improve efficiency and reduce waste.

Incentivize the “Waste Hierarchy”

Prioritize the best use of materials and resources. The EPA's waste hierarchy can be viewed as a stepladder to make strategic improvements.

Streamline Regulations and Standards

Consider instituting standardizing recycling and composting programs for single-family, multi-family and commercial sectors. Waste diversion in public spaces should be the same wherever residents go in their daily lives.

Be a Sustainable Purchasing Champion

Use city procurement to boost demand for sustainable products and create end markets by purchasing recycled materials.

Pursue New Partnerships

Strive to build partnerships between departments and leverage outside resources,

such as businesses that generate waste, manufacturers who need materials, universities and nonprofits.

Build Regional Support

Forge partnerships with local governments, as they are particularly important to achieving viability of scale for systems and infrastructure, as well as coordinating and streamlining the current patchwork of systems and regulations.

Find Innovative Funding Models and Grants

Levy dedicated fees to encourage extended producer responsibility and support initiatives that are reserved expressly for sustainable waste management. Examples of targeted fees include glass bottles, electronic waste and plastic shopping bags.

Build Up Infrastructure and Improve Technology

Invest in transfer stations, materials recovery facilities, compost facilities and eco-industrial parks. Your success depends on infrastructure and technology in the local system.

Pilot Programs

Test new concepts, services or facilities in small and controlled areas. Even unsuccessful pilots can provide valuable data concerning the economic and environmental benefits or effectiveness of a new program.