

Summary Document of EPA's America Recycles Day Follow-up Efforts For ECOS March SMM Call

Overview:

This document provides some background and proposed actions developed by four work groups assembled after EPA's 2018 America Recycles Day Summit to address issues in the U.S. recycling system. The work groups are comprised of stakeholders across the recycling system. Work groups met throughout February 2019 to begin developing strategies for each action area and will continue meeting throughout March and April 2019. The goal is to have a draft national framework for advancing the US recycling system in by America Recycles Day 2019.

1: Education & Outreach

Background

Most Americans want to recycle; they believe recycling provides an opportunity for them to be responsible caretakers of the earth. However, it can be difficult for consumers to understand what materials can be recycled, how materials can be recycled, and where to recycle different materials. This confusion often leads to placing recyclables in the trash or throwing trash in the recycling bin/cart, which contaminates recyclable material streams or contributes to disposal of otherwise valuable material.

In addition, the growing number of new materials in the form of products and packaging, means that the landscape of what is recyclable is constantly changing.

Finally, consumers need to be more aware of the importance of buying products with recycled content. Without these purchases, secondary markets will continue to lag and materials that may be recyclable do not get recycled due to lack of demand.

The development of effective, adaptive, and coordinated outreach and education strategies for consumers, federal, local, tribal and state governments is critical to promote consistent behaviors that will improve the quality and quantity of materials that Americans recycle and result in improved markets for recyclable materials and increased demand for products with recycled content.

Potential Work Group Action

- Develop consistent messages for key recycling issues. Begin by identifying work already being done and success stories to serve as starting points. Key issues or topics include outlining the benefits of recycling, the importance of buying recycled, and preventing "contamination" of recycling streams.

2: Enhancing Materials Management Infrastructure

Background

America's existing recycling infrastructure has not kept pace with today's recyclables stream. Manufacturers of new materials and products do not always consider the full life-cycle of products and materials and may not communicate effectively with the recycling industry, which impairs the ability of the recycling industry to prepare for and optimally manage the recycling of new materials.

Contamination in the recyclables stream can cause expensive equipment failures and halts production lines for the removal of unwanted and/or hazardous materials. The sorting and processing infrastructure that previously supported local recycling collection programs is struggling to meet demand for services. In some regions, the demand for commingled recycling service is outstripping the supply of processing infrastructure. At the same time, 50% of the public still does not have access to recycling.

The increased cost of processing combined with lower market prices and the inability to quickly move material leads to increased landfilling of recyclables, loss of revenue to jurisdictions, and decreased recycling rates. New investments in infrastructure are needed to help meet the nation's materials management needs and foster a more resilient solid waste system capable of withstanding pressures from disruptions.

Potential Work Group Action

- Create a clearinghouse for information that is accessible to everyone. Information would include descriptions and links on topics including:
 - what is working throughout the country to advance infrastructure,
 - identifying and connecting to grant information,
 - access to resources for state and local governments,
 - opportunities to fund and promote local pilot projects, and
 - help connecting cities with needs to programs who give grants and provide resources.
- Conduct and/or compile research on what is working in the recycling system to support infrastructure. Explore the wide range of programs going on throughout the country to understand where investment really makes a difference. Examine topics such as what has been the ROI on different types of investments so far, the key takeaways for projects of different types so we can provide best practices on what works. This action would focus on both creating awareness and learning about what creates the best investment.
- Create incentives to encourage investment in recycling and/or find existing tax incentives that organizations could leverage to help MRFs evolve to meet the challenges posed by the evolving materials stream.

3: Strengthening Secondary Materials Markets

Background

The rise of import bans on recycled materials has accelerated the need to improve domestic markets for recycled materials and recyclable products, as well as to integrate recycled materials and end-of-life management better into product and packaging designs. The closure of foreign markets for recyclable materials has fundamentally changed the assumptions governing the economics of recycling.

Encouraging communication and collaboration among the different sectors of the economy, including private enterprise and governmental entities, will support innovation, development, manufacture and reuse of high-quality recyclable materials that consumers want to purchase, that manufacturers want to use as feedstocks, that retailers want to offer for sale, and that recyclers want to collect and reprocess.

A stronger domestic recycling market will support local communities by creating more jobs and provide the overall U.S. economy with greater resilience and self-reliance. Municipalities will achieve cost savings when the markets for recycled materials are improved and more robust.

Potential Work Group Action

- Work with companies who are designing packaging and products to encourage the use of recycled content and improve recyclability of goods.
- Explore economic models to create robust and sustainable domestic secondary markets including possible incentives to drive demand and create more end users. Build and articulate a better business case for using recycled materials that identify the full value proposition and give full consideration to the unintended consequences and market impacts that such incentives could create.

4: Enhancing Measurement

Background

It is critical that we have consistent measurement methodologies when addressing materials management since measurement drives action. This includes having agreed-upon definitions for important terms that can be communicated consistently across industry (to include stakeholders across the recycling industry), state and local governments, and the public. When different entities such as states or municipalities use different definitions for terms such as diversion, it can lead to confusing messages about program success. For example, if one city or state includes construction and demolition debris along with their residential recycling numbers, they may be able to report higher diversion rates than those only including residential recycling. These inequitable comparisons can make some entities look bad and draw fire from non-governmental organizations and members of the public – even though they may have similar numbers to others if they compared using the consistent definitions and methodologies.

In addition to inconsistent terminology and measurement methodologies, there may also be data missing from state and local reporting. For example, some states may include private landfills and collection systems that may not have the same reporting requirements as public ones.

Standardizing and aligning measurement as well as tracking of recyclable materials will help better inform policy decisions and investments and help us determine whether we are making progress in improving recyclable materials management in the U.S. It will also help promote cross-jurisdictional learning by providing more transparent and comparable data sets.

Potential Work Group Action

- Compile information on a range of metrics and measures. This information should include definitions, what types of analyses these metrics and measures support, where in the recycling process these measures/metrics apply, data available, data gaps/needs, quality of data, and pros and cons.