



Circular Economy

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The U.S. Recycling System

In the United States, recycling is the process of collecting and processing materials (that would otherwise be thrown away as trash) and remanufacturing them into new products.

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U.S. Recycling System Overview

Learn More

- [About America Recycles Day](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/america-recycles-day) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/america-recycles-day>
- [About Recycling Basics and Benefits](https://epa.gov/recycle/recycling-basics-and-benefits) <https://epa.gov/recycle/recycling-basics-and-benefits>
- [About the National Recycling Strategy](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy>
- [About the Recycling Economic Information \(REI\) Report](https://epa.gov/smm/recycling-economic-information-rei-report) <https://epa.gov/smm/recycling-economic-information-rei-report>

While the recycling process often differs by commodity and locality, there are essentially three main steps: collection, processing, and remanufacturing into a new product.

1. **Collection:** Recyclable materials are generated by a consumer or business and then collected by a private hauler or government entity.

2. **Processing:** The materials are transported by the collector to a processing facility, such as a materials recovery facility or paper processor. At the processing facility, the recyclables are sorted, cleaned of contaminants, and prepared for transport to a milling facility or directly to a manufacturing facility. Some commodities may require more processing for additional sorting and decontamination. For example, glass and plastic are often sent to glass beneficiation plants and plastics reclaimers, respectively, where they are processed into mill-ready forms.

 3. **Remanufacturing:** After all necessary processing is completed, recyclables are made into new products at recycling plants or other facilities, such as paper mills or bottle manufacturing facilities.
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Benefits of Recycling

Recycling Saves Resources and Creates

Jobs

<https://epa.gov/sites/default/files/2019-07/enginner_with_cardboard_recycling_bin_0.jpg>



Recycling is an important economic driver, as it helps create jobs and tax revenues. The Recycling Economic Information (REI) Report <<https://epa.gov/smm/recycling-economic-information-rei-report>> found that, in a single year, recycling and reuse activities in the United States accounted for 757,000 jobs, \$36.6 billion in wages and \$6.7 billion in tax revenues. This equates to 1.57 jobs, \$76,000 in wages and \$14,101 in tax revenues for every 1,000 tons of material recycled.

Environmental, economic and community benefits can be attained from recycling.

For the environment, recycling:

- Reduces the amount of waste sent to landfills and incinerators.
- Conserves natural resources such as timber, water and minerals.

- Prevents pollution and reduces greenhouse gases by reducing the need to mine and process new raw materials.

For the economy, recycling:

- Increases economic security by tapping a domestic source of materials.
- Saves energy.

For communities, recycling:

- Supports American manufacturing and conserves valuable resources.
- Helps create jobs in the recycling and manufacturing industries in the United States.

Current Challenges Facing the System

While the benefits of recycling are clear, growing and strengthening the U.S. recycling system to create more jobs and enhance environmental and community benefits will require multi-entity collaboration to address the challenges currently facing the system. Current challenges include:

- Most Americans want to recycle, as 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 or cart.
- America's recycling infrastructure has not kept pace with today's waste stream. Communication between the manufacturers of new materials and products and the recycling industry needs to be enhanced to prepare for and optimally manage the recycling of new materials.
- Domestic markets for recycled materials need to be strengthened. Historically, some of the recycled materials generated in the United States have been exported internationally. However, changing international policies have limited the export of materials. We need to better integrate recycled materials and end-of-life management into product and packaging designs. We need to improve communication among the different sectors of the recycling system to strengthen existing materials markets and to develop new innovative markets.

- Entities across the recycling system agree that more consistent measurement methodologies are needed to measure recycling system performance. These more standardized metrics can then be used to create effective goals and track progress.

EPA's National Recycling Strategy <<https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy>> identifies actions needed to address the challenges in the U.S. recycling system. The actions are for entities across the value chain - including federal, state, Tribal and local governments, private businesses, trade associations, and nonprofit organizations. In response to some of these challenges, EPA has developed several products to assist communities in improving their recycling programs.

EPA Tools for Communities Trying to Improve Recycling

- Model Recycling Program Toolkit. <<https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/model-recycling-program-toolkit>>
- Standardized Terms for Materials Accepted by Municipal Recycling Programs. <<https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/standardized-terms-materials-accepted-municipal-recycling-programs>>
- Training on Creating Educational Messages that Lead to Behavior Change. <<https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/creating-messages-drive-behavior-change>>

[Circular Economy Home Page](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy>

[Circular Economy Basics](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/what-circular-economy) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/what-circular-economy>

[Draft National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/draft-national-strategy-reducing-food-loss-and-waste-and-recycling-organics) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/draft-national-strategy-reducing-food-loss-and-waste-and-recycling-organics>

[Draft National Strategy to Prevent Plastic Pollution](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/draft-national-strategy-prevent-plastic-pollution)
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[National Recycling Strategy](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy>

[Engage](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy-part-one-series-building-circular-economy-join-effort) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy-part-one-series-building-circular-economy-join-effort>

[Funding Infrastructure Improvements](https://epa.gov/infrastructure/bipartisan-infrastructure-law-transforming-us-recycling-and-waste-management)
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[Recycling Toolkit](https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/model-recycling-program-toolkit) <https://epa.gov/circulareconomy/model-recycling-program-toolkit>

[Sustainable Materials Management](https://epa.gov/smm) <https://epa.gov/smm>

[Reduce, Reuse, Recycle](https://epa.gov/recycle) <https://epa.gov/recycle>

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