



January 18, 2022

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT U.S. recycling

PRO POINTS

- ❁ **The U.S. recycles less than a third of its waste each year, a rate that has been stagnant for a decade.** The Biden administration wants to boost that to 50 percent by 2030 as part of a broader strategy to combat climate change.
- ❁ **But the federal government has little authority** over the waste stream, which is managed by a patchwork of state and municipal programs. And there's been little investment in recycling infrastructure, from public or private sources. The system hasn't kept up with an increasing amount of complex materials.
- ❁ **Congress and states are considering a range of policies** to address the problem, including bans on single-use plastics. Another idea would require companies to pay for waste. Some states and companies are setting goals to use more recycled plastic and other materials.

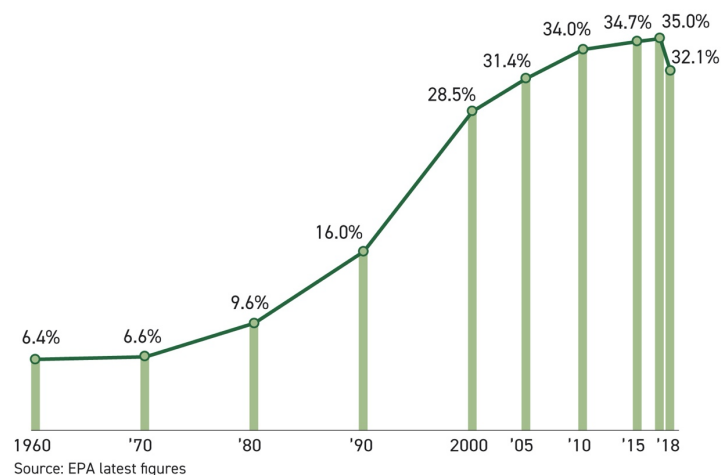
HOW WE GOT HERE

For decades, China was the world's dumping ground, taking in large amounts of recyclable waste and processing it into new products. That changed in 2018, when China banned imports of certain plastics, paper and other materials that were often contaminated with trash and causing environmental problems.

With their biggest customer gone, recyclers from the U.S. to Australia scrambled to find new markets. And America's own outdated recycling system found itself in a harsh spotlight. Most waste ends up in landfills or is burned for energy. Only 9 percent of plastic, 25 percent of glass and 35 percent of aluminum actually gets recycled. With cardboard and paper, the recycling rate is nearly 70 percent, according to the EPA.

U.S. recycling peaked in 2017, rapidly declined in 2018

PERCENT OF MUNICIPAL WASTE STREAM RECYCLED OR COMPOSTED



Even before China closed its borders to U.S. junk and garbage, consumers, environmental groups, investors and policymakers were sounding alarms about the planet's growing amount of waste, particularly plastic, and its effect on marine life and the climate.

They've since upped their calls for a more circular economy, one in which people and businesses use fewer and more sustainable materials that can be recaptured and made into new products.



The bipartisan infrastructure deal Congress enacted last year included \$275 million for waste and recycling systems and \$75 million for programs to educate consumers about what can and can't be tossed in blue collection bins. The funding was authorized by Save Our Seas Act 2.0, S. 1982 (116), which directed federal agencies to develop strategies for reducing marine pollution.

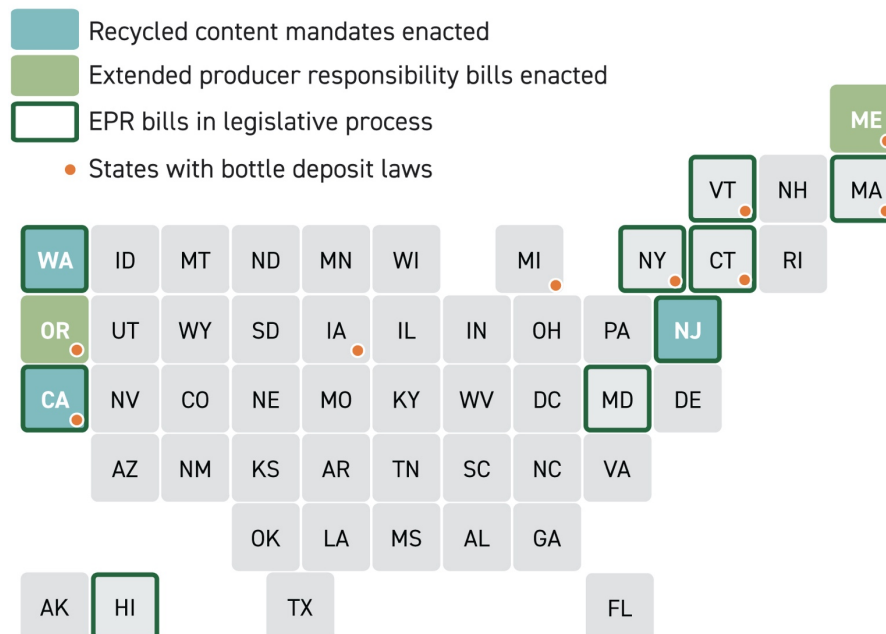
The money falls far short of the \$17 billion that The Recycling Partnership estimates is needed over five years to boost the recycling rate to 70 percent. The business-backed nonprofit invests private dollars in community recycling infrastructure and education.

WHAT'S NEXT

The EPA in November outlined the first part of its plan to increase recycling, reduce waste and preserve natural resources. Administrator Michael Regan said the agency will work with communities, corporations, and tribal nations to award recycling grants, educate the public and improve data collection to measure progress. EPA also plans to study what policies would address America's waste problems.

Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) and Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-Calif.) have their own proposal. Their Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act, S. 984 and H.R. 2238, introduced in March, would set recycling targets, temporarily ban new petrochemical plants and regulate factories that discharge plastic pellets into waterways. But the bills haven't had hearings nor have they attracted Republican co-sponsors.

West Coast and Northeast lead U.S. in laws for recycling



The real action is expected at the state level. Maine and Oregon last year became the first in the country to enact extended producer responsibility laws. At least eight others, including California and New York, are considering similar bills that could move in 2022, according to the National Caucus of Environmental Legislators.



Major corporations have endorsed the concept of extended producer responsibility, which requires companies to help pay for cleaning up the waste their products leave behind. The American Chemistry Council, AMERIPEN, the American Beverage Association and other trade groups in 2021 endorsed the policy partly out of self-interest. Their members — which include Dow Chemical Co. and Coca-Cola Co. — need more recycled material to meet their own sustainability targets.

On Jan. 10, the Democratically controlled New Jersey Legislature sent Gov. Phil Murphy a bill that would require plastic bottles and bags to include a certain amount of recycled material. Glass bottles and paper bags, too, would have recycled content minimums. If Murphy, a Democrat, signs the bill, New Jersey would be the third state after California and Washington to enact a recycled content law.

POWER PLAYERS

- **New York Gov. Kathy Hochul:** The new governor in her 2022 State of the State agenda proposed extended producer responsibility as a way to slash the amount of recyclable products ending up in landfills. Hochul, a Democrat, said the program would boost New York climate goals, too, because the solid waste sector is responsible for 12 percent of state greenhouse gas emissions.
- **EPA Administrator Michael Regan:** He is leading implementation of the Biden administration's national recycling strategy and will coordinate with public- and private- sector stakeholders. He promised to prioritize environmental justice communities, too, which are disproportionately the site of waste incinerators.