Committee on Energy and Commerce

Opening Statement as Prepared for Delivery
of
Subcommittee on Environment Ranking Member Paul D. Tonko

Hearing on "Beyond the Blue Bin: Forging a Federal Landscape for Recycling Innovation and Economic Growth"

July 16, 2025

Thank you, Mr. Chair. I want to start by congratulating you on taking over leadership of the Subcommittee. I look forward to working together. The United States leads the world in many things. Unfortunately, this includes the amount of waste we generate. And most of this waste ends up landfilled, incinerated, or littered. In recognition of this, we have spent more than 50 years promoting a waste management hierarchy. Every kid learns the three R's – reduce, reuse, and recycle. So, while today's discussion will focus on that third "R", I would be remiss if I didn't remind everyone of the need to similarly focus on reduction and reuse as critical components to our national waste strategy.

Today's hearing will cover a wide range of recycling challenges facing our country, each of which could be its own hearing. But across each of these challenges I believe we will see a common thread: The status quo is untenable, often creating environmental issues while letting billions of dollars of valuable materials go unrecovered. I understand the desire to promote innovation to overcome these challenges, as suggested by the hearing's title, but in reality, our recycling system needs some very basic, foundational improvements before we can even begin to suggest that new technologies will save us.

More than one-quarter of Americans do not have access to recycling and less than half recycle at home. There are glaring needs for better data, accessibility, labeling, and education to enable people to feel confident that when they use the blue bin correctly, their efforts will actually result in real recycling, by which I mean products are ending up in a responsible end market and not being diverted to a landfill or downcycled.

In recent years, Congress has tried to address these basic needs of our recycling system. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act included significant funding for State, local, and Tribal governments to implement EPA's National Recycling Strategy. Other bipartisan bills, like the RIAA and RCAA, seek to further support these recycling basics.

These proposals will not singlehandedly fix our system, but they represent good first steps to improve data and promote accessibility. And I hope that the coalition building and policy development that went into these bills will make it easier for us to work together towards bigger and more ambitious policies in the future.

Because in the absence of Federal leadership, several states have already begun to create such policies. This includes Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, laws to require

packaging and paper producers to take financial and environmental responsibility for their products. While it is still too early to judge these state laws' effectiveness, we know the intent is to improve recycling services and infrastructure while encouraging greater market demand for recycled materials.

These programs' fee structures often include a concept known as eco-modulation to further incentivize the use of products that are more sustainable, including products designed to be more easily recycled. Designing for recyclability is a commonsense innovation worth encouraging. Similarly, in recent years there have been major improvements in optical sorting, including the introduction of AI, to improve recycling facilities' efficiency. But many industries have used the notion of innovation to promote a suite of new technologies, commonly known as chemical or advanced recycling, aimed at transforming hard-to-recycle materials.

These are controversial technologies, and not without good reason. While we should not foreclose consideration of any tool to address the problems with our waste management system, we must ensure that these technologies actually displace virgin production and do not introduce environmental and public health risks.

At this stage, I have not seen much evidence that these technologies are succeeding by these metrics, with much of their output being used as fuels rather than new, recycled products. So, before we center the debate on these technologies for hard-to-recycle products, I want to reiterate my belief that we should prioritize our system's more fundamental shortcomings and consider why so many materials that rely upon proven, existing recycling technologies frequently fail to reach even 50% recycling rates.

Finally, I am glad that members of the majority are beginning to recognize the tremendous opportunity for recovery and reuse of critical minerals. For years, Democrats on this Committee have proposed policies to promote the development of secure, domestic supply chains by recovering critical minerals in EV batteries and e-waste.

In the IIJA, we included funding to support the development of battery recycling best practices and voluntary labeling to further this goal, and there is clearly much more we can do. Moving forward, I would welcome the opportunity to work together to ensure we are maximizing this largely untapped resource.

Thank you. I yield back.