

**Written Testimony of Keefe Harrison,
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On

“Beyond the Blue Bin: Forging a Federal Landscape for Recycling Innovation and Economic Growth”

**Before the
House Committee on Energy and Commerce
Subcommittee on Environment**

July 16, 2025

Chairman Palmer, Ranking Member Tonko, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for inviting me to testify on opportunities for recycling innovation and economic growth. It is my honor to be with you.

I founded The Recycling Partnership eleven years ago to unite the public and private sectors in building a stronger U.S. residential recycling system and protecting our planet. Our mission was—and still is—to capture the paper and packaging from American homes, putting those materials back to work within a thriving circular economy. Since then, my organization has grown from an idea into an institution delivering half a billion dollars’ worth of impact in towns across this country. We are fiercely committed to producing real results, leveraging deep relationships with hundreds of states and community recycling program leaders, recycling operators, packaging manufacturers, brands, and retailers to create meaningful change benefiting every American. It is our mission to build a better recycling system in the U.S., and it is why we bring together companies, communities, and policymakers. Recycling is at an inflection point, and with your help, we can land the outcome our country deserves.

Our country deserves a robust recycling system that both fuels our economy and protects our environment. As a 28-year veteran of recycling, I believe this moment in time is ripe for finally delivering that potential. Why now? Because the public is calling for it. In fact, 81% of Americans believe that we are not doing enough to combat wastefulness and 77% of Americans believe that recycling has a positive impact. And with the seven states that have recently passed Extended Producer Responsibility legislation, one in five Americans will see the returns of investing in a circular economy and benefit from an at-scale recycling system. These critical programs are both growing the recycling system and reducing the cost burden for communities by requiring companies to ensure that the products they produce are properly recycled, composted, or reused. This is momentum we have never seen.

However, this remarkable progress is at risk unless we pay attention to two further components: imports and softening corporate commitments. Increasingly, cheap imported materials are threatening to upend market dynamics for recycled content, risking thousands of American jobs. And distressingly, many companies are failing to meet the recycling goals they have set and are responding not by leaning in, but by stepping back. Recycling only happens when old stuff turns into new stuff, and if companies are not ensuring they are putting our domestic recycled content feedstock to work, the momentum I

just spoke of will not continue. We need federal and state policies that provide the right incentive structures for companies along the supply chain to utilize domestic recycled content.

Good news—this is fixable. With the attention of this important committee, we can succeed. To support that work, I have outlined where the U.S. recycling system is today, what an effective system looks like, and how we will get there.

Where the U.S. Stands Today: The State of Recycling

In 2024, The Recycling Partnership released our State of Recycling Report, a comprehensive analysis of the nation’s residential recycling capabilities.¹ The report shows that only 73% of the nation’s residents have access to recycling service and fewer than half take part. As a result, 76% of the paper and all packaging materials (e.g., aluminum, glass, plastic, steel) in American homes are lost to landfilling or incineration. Why does that matter to the U.S. economy? Simple: It reduces the domestic manufacturing supply chain. That is nearly 34 million tons of domestic manufacturing feedstock that could be turned into new products but is instead wasted. It is clear that this business-as-usual scenario is wasting valuable resources, and we need to do better.

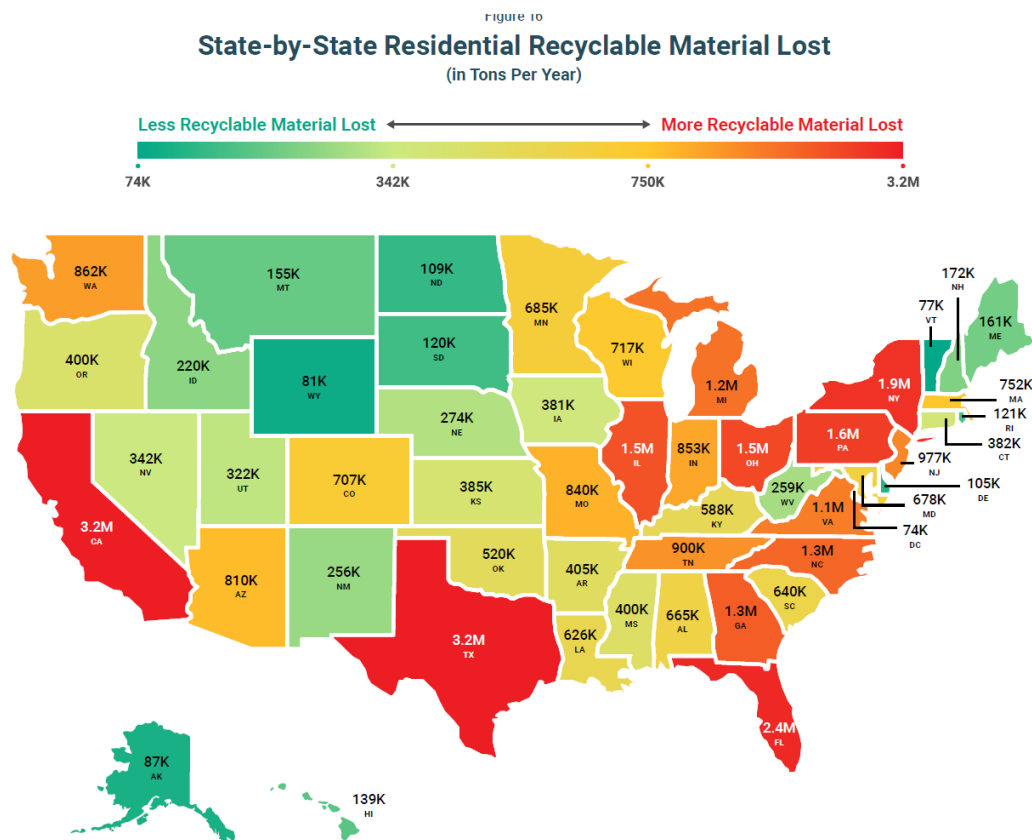


Figure 1. State-by-State Residential Recyclable Material Lost from the [State of Residential Recycling Report](#).

¹ The Recycling Partnership’s [State of Recycling Report](#)

What Good Looks Like: The Future Opportunity of Recycling

Fully investing in recycling—which means giving every household across the nation access to recycling services—would create nearly 200,000 jobs, return \$8.8 billion in new materials to the American economy, and save taxpayers and local governments \$11 billion over the next 10 years.² It would require a \$17 billion capital investment, but it is an investment with an almost guaranteed rate of return. For every dollar that we invest in recycling across the country, whether it is successful government programs like the Solid Waste Infrastructure for Recycling (SWIFR) grant program administered by EPA or public-private partnerships spearheaded by organizations like The Recycling Partnership, we create new jobs and new opportunities for American markets.

There is also an opportunity for the recycling system to evolve and innovate over time, leveraging new technologies and best practices learned from on-the-ground experience. Yet every innovation, whether in packaging design, processing, or community outreach, must be tested for its impact on people, the planet, and the system. Innovation should not come at the expense of human and planetary health but should aim to fully serve our communities and our recycling system.

Data-Driven Solutions: The 5 Requirements of an Effective Recycling System

American recycling is often pictured as simply the “blue bin,” the iconic symbol at the end of driveways across the nation. But recycling goes beyond the bin. It spans a value chain with local and global decision makers at every step. Whether an item successfully is recycled into something new is determined not only by the initial blueprints of the packaging engineers that designed it, but also by the design choices of brands and retailers, by the ability and commitment of hard-working American families to recycle, by the equipment and technology of haulers and recyclers to sort and process the material, and by the markets where the material is sold as feedstock for manufacturing.

For the United States residential recycling system to function effectively, these five requirements must be met:

- **100% of packaging needs to be recyclable.** Following the waste management hierarchy, paper and packaging should be designed to minimize waste generation and maximize resource utilization, prioritizing source reduction, reuse, and recycling—adhering to clear, harmonized, and transparent recyclability standards.
- **100% of households need access to recycling from their homes.** Everyone can dispose of trash, but not every household has access to recycling. For those with access, some locations do not accept all packaging types, thus limiting the amount of recyclable material collected.
- **Residents need to fully engage in recycling.** Recyclable material is lost because some households with access do not receive sufficient communication to help them use their recycling service and recycle all their recyclables. In an effective system, at least 90% of households should participate.

² The Recycling Partnership’s [Paying It Forward Report](#)

- **Recycling facilities need to effectively process 95% of the material.** Once collected from households, recycling facilities need adequate technology and infrastructure to efficiently sort and process different material types.
- **Recycling facilities need sufficient and commercially viable supply chains.** After recycling facilities sort the various material types, they must be able to sell these recycled commodities. Sufficient markets for these materials are key to an effective recycling system.

Fewer than half of plastic packages are recyclable by design. Only 73% of U.S. households can set out recycling, and just 43% do so. Although 87% of collected material is sorted and sold, demand still trails behind what the system supplies. Given these data points, every link in the residential chain can improve. Grounded in real-world experience and data, The Recycling Partnership equips policymakers, companies, and community recycling programs to close these gaps and unlock widespread economic and environmental benefits.

An Innovation Deep Dive: Chemical Recycling Principles

Whether we use the phrase molecular, chemical, or advanced recycling, we need to be very clear about what problem we are trying to solve. Recycling is not an end goal in and of itself; recycling is a means to an end of conserving natural resources, building regional economies, and creating sustainable, resilient communities. Every American deserves clean soil, air, and water. I have dedicated my career to improving the U.S. recycling system because I care about protecting natural resources and the critical biodiversity of this planet. Before recycling, I worked on a logging crew in North Carolina, researched giant sea turtles in Costa Rica, tiny bog turtles in the U.S., and studied reindeer husbandry in Finland. Today I work with Fortune 500 companies and communities to build a better recycling system, but the goal remains the same: protect natural resources and the biodiversity they sustain.

With these goals in mind, The Recycling Partnership is building a stronger U.S. residential recycling system by embracing innovation at every step. Electric trucks and smarter routing boost curbside collection. AI and optical sorters capture more high-value material. New domestic uses for recycled content keep dollars and jobs at home. Recycling has always evolved and changed in response to evolving packaging streams, new business opportunities, and regulatory frameworks. Technologies that fall under the umbrella term of “chemical recycling” are just one example of innovation, largely driven by the reality that some of the plastics in today’s stream are difficult or unable to be recycled mechanically, particularly for application in food-contact packaging.

The term “chemical recycling” refers broadly to a wide variety of processes and technologies that differ from mechanical recycling in that they use heat and/or chemical reactions to break down plastics into raw materials for remanufacturing. Such technologies vary greatly in terms of what materials it can accept as inputs, what is produced as outputs, the amount of energy used, and the impacts on the environment and human health. Before offering an endorsement or rejection of a broad category of recycling technologies, it is critical that we get specific about the process in question and can answer with confidence the following questions:

- **What is the impact on the environment?** Chemical recycling facilities should be environmentally preferable to the production of new plastics and robustly regulated for impacts including emissions to air, discharges to water, water usage and management, chemical management, plastic pollution, and generation and disposal of hazardous and non-hazardous waste.
- **What is the impact on communities and human health?** These processes should not negatively impact the people, water and air surrounding the facility, especially low-income communities that often bear a disproportionate share of the impact.
- **What are the supply chain economics?** Having the technical capability to recycle a material does not automatically lead to successful recycling in practice and at scale. We must be transparent and realistic about the physical and economic challenges of collecting, sorting, and processing recyclables as feedstock for remanufacturing in a cost-competitive manner.
- **What is the appropriate timeline for scale?** Change takes time and it is important to know how long innovation, if successful, will take to reach meaningful scale. Community recycling programs cannot be flipped on and off like a switch, and the American people demand greater transparency around what happens to the materials they put in their recycling bins.
- **What is the goal and how do we ensure transparent impacts?** Chemical recycling processes should be driven by a genuine need to turn “old stuff into new stuff” with transparent reporting as to what these operations yield. They should not be motivated by a desire to claim that “recycling” is occurring without meaningful production of raw material. As new technologies disrupt past business approaches, ensuring that they are positive for people and the planet will speed up their adoption and impact.

As Extended Produce Responsibility (EPR) legislation rolls out in seven states, all recycling technologies—mechanical and chemical—will face stricter reporting, transparency, and newly defined performance standards. This shift is a chance to transform recycling for good, driving innovation that is grounded in science, data, and meaningful purpose.

How We Deliver Recycling’s Full Economic & Environmental Impact: Opportunities for Action

As this committee considers how best to ensure recycling delivers its full potential, I advise that we adopt a few guiding principles:

1. Ground decisions in a clear-eyed, data-driven view of today’s recycling system.
2. Take a systems approach to designing solutions, diversifying interventions instead of chasing silver bullets.
3. Support robust policies that drive accountability and level the playing field for responsible brands and U.S. recyclers.

There are three immediate opportunities for Congress and this Committee to put these principles to work, forging a federal landscape for recycling innovation and economic growth.

Strategies to Eliminate Waste and Accelerate Recycling Development (STEWARD) Act (S. 351)

First, I call on the members of this Committee to mark up and combine the Recycling Infrastructure Accessibility Act (H.R.2145) and the Recycling and Composting Accountability Act (H.R.4109) into the

Strategies to Eliminate Waste and Accelerate Recycling Development (STEWARD) Act (S.351). The STEWARD Act has been introduced in the Senate and passed out of the Environment and Public Works Committee by unanimous consent. It is common-sense legislation that would help rural and underserved communities access recycling markets and help us better understand the recycling and composting system here in the United States. Both bills are bipartisan, and both bills have received a wide array of industry and environmentalist support.³

Cultivating Investment in Recycling and Circular Local Economies (CIRCLE) Act

Second, I encourage the members of this Committee to support the Cultivating Investment in Recycling and Circular Local Economies (CIRCLE) Act. The CIRCLE Act would establish a recycling infrastructure investment tax credit to stimulate investment in the domestic recycling economy and reward those who make investments in American businesses and communities. Also bipartisan and supported by a wide array of stakeholders, the CIRCLE Act would accelerate investment in recycling while reducing the burden on governments at all levels—including the federal government—to fund recycling systems.

Global Treaty on Plastic Pollution

Third, I encourage this Committee, the Administration, and stakeholders across the system to remain engaged in the ongoing global treaty on plastic pollution. An effective global treaty is one that leverages the weight and power of the American economy to accelerate the transition to a circular economy. American innovations, like the state-level frameworks for Extended Producer Responsibility for paper and packaging can provide templates for successful international policies. It is important that the U.S. remains at the negotiating table to inform the global plastic treaty and that this Committee consider components of the global treaty that could become U.S. law.

Chairman Palmer, Ranking Member Tonko, and Members of the Committee, America is at a pivotal moment for recycling. By championing pragmatic policies like the STEWARD and CIRCLE Acts and maintaining U.S. leadership in the global plastic pollution treaty, Congress can accelerate investment, strengthen domestic manufacturers, and keep valuable materials in our economy instead of our landfills. The Recycling Partnership stands ready to support your efforts every step of the way. Thank you for the opportunity to testify; I welcome your questions.

About The Recycling Partnership

The Recycling Partnership is a purpose-driven organization committed to building a better recycling system, one that delivers the economic and environmental benefits our communities and the hundreds of thousands of people who work throughout the recycling industry deserve. The Recycling Partnership's team of experts, practitioners, and thought leaders with real-world experience works with its partners to create meaningful change across the recycling system and assist communities, companies, and policymakers in enacting such change. The Recycling Partnership uses its one-of-its-

³ The Recycling Partnership is proud to have [led a letter](#) signed by 65 stakeholders from across the spectrum – private companies, non-profits, trade organizations and more – to call for the passage of RIAA and RCAA last Congress.

kind National Recycling Database that reaches more than 9,000 U.S. recycling programs and develops practical and innovative resources to address critical gaps in the recycling system.