

Paper Recycling Works

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is not an effective legislative solution for paper products and could unintentionally undermine the paper recycling system.

The paper industry has a demonstrated, measurable record of success in making paper products more circular and sustainable through market-based approaches.

- For the past 20 years, the paper industry has recycled about fifty million tons of recovered paper each year; over one billion tons in total¹.
- The paper recycling rate has grown over decades, and remained consistently high, meeting or exceeding 63 percent since 2009².
- More than 40 percent of all material used to produce paper and packaging in the U.S. in 2019 was recovered for recycling, the highest rate ever achieved by the industry⁴.
- And for the first time in 2019, more than 50 percent of the fiber used to make containerboard, the material used to make corrugated containers, at U.S. mills was recycled fiber⁵.

66.2 percent of paper consumed in the United States was recovered for recycling in 2019. The three-year average recycling rate for the material that would be most impacted by EPR, old corrugated containers (OCC), is already 92.3 percent³.

Robust investment in manufacturing capacity using recovered paper is an essential pillar of the industry's success, which EPR could hurt.

- U.S. packaging and pulp producers have also committed more than \$4.1 billion in manufacturing infrastructure investments (from 2019-2023) to continue the best use of recovered fiber in our products⁶.
- These investments would double the commitment made by members of the Alliance to End Plastic Waste⁷.
- EPR fees paid by producers reduce the capital available to support further investment in manufacturing capacity using recovered fiber.

US EPA data confirms the superior record and environmental success story of paper recycling in municipal collection programs⁸.

- According to the U.S. EPA, in 2018 paper and paper-based packaging had a far higher recycling rate from municipal solid waste (MSW) streams than other major recyclable commodities: Paper (68.2 percent); Steel (33.1 percent); Glass (25.0 percent); Aluminum (17.2 percent); and Plastics (8.5 percent)⁹.

- According to the EPA, more paper by weight is recovered for recycling from municipal solid waste streams than plastic, glass, steel and aluminum combined¹⁰.
- More than twice as much paper is recycled than is sent to landfills, and every ton of paper recovered for recycling saves 3.3 cubic yards of landfill space¹¹.
- In 2018, 46 million tons of paper and paperboard were recycled from municipal solid waste, compared to 3 million tons of plastics. By contrast, that year 27 million tons of plastics in municipal solid waste were sent to landfills. That's 76 percent of all plastic waste¹².

Burdensome and inflexible mandates like EPR could unintentionally undermine paper recycling.

- EPR shifts financial responsibility for recycling without offering corresponding resources to improve collection, often resulting in increased costs with no improvement in program performance.
- Manufacturers and brand owners would be responsible for assuming financial responsibility for, and often operational control of, municipal recycling programs, without the expertise or experience in running or improving these programs.
- Advocacy organizations often exaggerate the benefits of EPR, which is unlikely to improve upon the paper industry's already high recycling rate.
- The record of highly centralized, command-and-control EPR programs in Canada and Europe offers no real proof of obvious advantages over the market-based approaches and locally-operated programs prevalent in the U.S.
- A recent research paper performed by York University in Ontario concluded there is no evidence to indicate that the steward-operated EPR program in Canada will result in cost containment or increases recycling performance¹³.
- The British Columbia EPR model, often the template for U.S. state EPR bills, has seen program costs increase by approximately 26 percent from program inception in 2015 to 2018, while program performance (measured as the percent waste tonnages diverted) has increased by 1 percent¹⁴.
- Unlike in Europe and Canada, where EPR programs are run by national and provincial governments, recycling programs in the U.S. are operated by local governments, which have more freedom to tailor recycling programs to the needs of local communities.

Sources:

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