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Local Elected Officials Urge Governor to Invest in Colorado's New Recycling Economy

With a recycling rate barely above 10 percent, Colorado lags behind dozens of states looking to recycling to create jobs and new businesses.

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(BOULDER, COLORADO) — America Recycles Day is this Sunday, November 15.

Yes, America recycles, but does Colorado?

You might think that one of the greenest, most outdoorsy states in the nation would be a recycling leader.

Not so.

In fact, Colorado is among the 20 most wasteful states in the nation along with Alaska, Arizona, Idaho, Mississippi and Oklahoma, to name a few¹. That's a shocker especially considering that the modern recycling movement was practically born in Boulder, Colorado, back in the 1970s when residents refurbished an old yellow school bus and drove around collecting cans, bottles and paper.

"We're missing out on a huge opportunity to create new jobs and businesses while conserving resources at the same time," said Suzanne Jones, executive director of Boulder-based Eco-Cycle, one of the largest nonprofit recyclers in the U.S. "Other states that have invested in recycling like Michigan and North Carolina are seeing economic growth as a direct result, not to mention big environmental benefits."

A group of local elected officials joined by Eco-Cycle and the Colorado Association for Recycling (CAFR), are using America Recycles Day to launch an initiative designed to increase recycling statewide, generate new jobs, and create and expand recycling businesses and materials markets. These leaders include: State House Speaker Dickey Lee Hullinghorst, State Senator Kerry Donovan, State Representative Kit Roupe,

Boulder County Commissioner Deb Gardner, Eagle County Commissioner Jill Ryan, and Fort Collins City Councilmember Bob Overbeck.

“I look forward to working with the governor to move the state forward on recycling,” said State Senator Kerry Donovan. “We have an opportunity to increase recycling and advance an innovative economy that supports small businesses,” she added. “Landfilling is a dead-end while recycling supports sustainable economic growth.”

“We know from local surveys that Eagle County residents value recycling,” said Eagle County Commissioner Jill Ryan. “Eagle County’s residential and commercial recycling rate was 24.8 percent in 2014, which while better than the statewide rate, still does not come close to matching the rest of the country,” Ryan said.

According to the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE), Colorado recycles only 11 percent of its waste, excluding scrap metal. This puts it way below the national average of 34 percent calculated by the EPA. Residential curbside recycling is available in less than half of counties statewide,ⁱⁱ and more than 65 percent of Coloradans never recycle or recycle only sporadicallyⁱⁱⁱ.

Despite the leadership of communities like Aspen, Boulder, Fort Collins and Vail, who are plowing ahead with everything from a ban on landfilling cardboard in Fort Collins to a universal zero waste ordinance in Boulder, statewide recycling has stagnated since the 1970s.

Community leaders are calling on Governor Hickenlooper to get Colorado back on track. CDPHE is already working on a statewide waste and materials management plan due in June that focuses on landfill issues. Eco-Cycle and CAFR are recommending that the Governor establish a task force to conduct a parallel effort focused on building markets and infrastructure for recycling, reuse and remanufacturing, and composting. The proposed task force would also do the following:

- Set statewide recycling goals with interim targets. Colorado is one of only 12 states without any goals^{iv}.
- Ensure that all Coloradans have access to recycling services by increasing state funding for local communities to set up programs and infrastructure.
- Conduct an in-depth market analysis and recycling development plan to create jobs and grow businesses across Colorado.

The Colorado recycling industry’s potential could be huge. Consider that even with a very low recycling rate, Colorado’s recycling, reuse and remanufacturing industries already provide nearly 86,000 jobs and generate \$8.7 billion in economic benefits annually, according to a report released late last year by CDPHE^v.

“Imagine the potential jobs and revenue that could be generated if Colorado increased its recycling rate,” said Marjorie Griek, CAFR’s executive director. “Colorado could be a regional recycling powerhouse.”

Colorado’s low recycling rate costs jobs and money—a lot of jobs and money. Recycling generates at least nine times more jobs than landfilling, and reuse and remanufacturing create 30 times more jobs. In 2014, Colorado landfilled valuable materials worth as much as \$170 million^{vi}—that’s enough money to cover the tuition costs of sending more than 15,000 students to the University of Colorado for a year.

Recycling-based businesses are slowly coming to Colorado, although the majority of materials are sold outside the state and some overseas. For example: Momentum Glass, a Utah-based company, is building a state-of-the-art facility in Boulder County to recycle glass into new beer bottles for Colorado’s thriving brewing industry. Another good example is Spring Back, the mattress recycling company that recently expanded its Colorado operations with help from a state-funded grant.

In addition to strengthening Colorado’s economy, recycling also benefits the environment and the climate: It reduces the energy used to make and transport products and food, reduces greenhouse gas emissions,

saves water and conserves natural resources. At Colorado’s current recycling rate of 11 percent, the state prevents more than 1.9 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions annually—the equivalent of taking about 400,000 cars off the road^{vii}.

For more information, go to: www.ecocycle.org/zerowastecolorado

ⁱ Shin, Dolly, 2014. Generation and Disposition of Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) in the United States. Accessed at: http://www.seas.columbia.edu/earth/wtert/sofos/Dolly_Shin_Thesis.pdf.

ⁱⁱ CDPHE, 2014. Report Concerning Senate Joint Resolution 13-038. Accessed at: <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/swreports>.

ⁱⁱⁱ CDPHE, 2014. Report Concerning Senate Joint Resolution 13-038. Accessed at: <https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/cdphe/swreports>.

^{iv} Without recycling goal: Northeast Recycling Council, 2011. Disposal Bans & Mandatory Recycling in the United States. Accessed at https://nerc.org/documents/disposal_bans_mandatory_recycling_united_states.pdf.

^v ENVIRON International Corporation, 2014. Economic Study of Recycling in Colorado. Accessed at: <https://www.colorado.gov/cdphe/recycling-grants-and-rebates>

^{vi} Skumatz, Lisa A., and Dana D’Souza, May 2015, "Colorado’s Wasted Value: Recyclables Discarded in the Front Range and Rest of the State and their Dollar, Job, and GHG Impacts", Skumatz Economic Research Associates, Superior Colorado.

^{vii} CDPHE, 2014. Annual Solid Waste Diversion Totals, 2013 data. Accessed at: https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/sites/default/files/HM_sw-annual-diversion-totals.pdf.

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