



The State of Recycling in New Mexico



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Foreword

Even though the mantra of “Reduce, Reuse, Recycle” has been around since the 1970s, most people in the United States still don’t live by it.¹ The United States makes up only 4 percent of the global population, yet we generate more than 30 percent of the planet’s waste.² This shocking reality stems from an economy that encourages disposable consumption: half of American plastic products are designed for single use.³ Not only have we failed to reduce, but our attempts to recycle are also lacking -- 65 percent of goods in the U.S. are landfilled or incinerated.⁴ We need to work towards bringing that number down to zero. We can improve in all aspects of waste reduction. For items that cannot be reduced or reused, recycling remains a crucial component of how we deal with waste.

Waste systems are typically organized and funded at the municipal or county level. It’s important to measure success to know where we must focus our energy. Inefficiencies in waste management can come from anywhere in the process: disposal, collection, sorting, or the after-market. The following report focuses on disposal and collection for the top ten most populous counties in New Mexico based on their residential recycling rates.

*The recycling rate is calculated as follows:
$$\frac{\text{Waste diverted (via compost, recycling, and reuse)}}{\text{Total waste (landfill + diverted)}}$$*

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Recycling rates in New Mexico reveal one of the most wasteful states in the nation. At 19 percent, the statewide rate falls almost 16 points below the national average 34.7 percent, based on the most recent available data.⁵ In other words, 81 percent of the waste in New Mexico goes to landfills, incinerators, or spills into the environment. Even the highest local rate, boasted by Lea County at 24 percent, falls well below national average. The table below shows how the top ten most populous counties stack up:

Jurisdiction	Recycling Rate (2015) ⁶
New Mexico State	19%
Lea County	24%
Bernalillo County	23%
Dona Ana County	22%
Santa Fe County	19%
Sandoval County	14%
Otero County	8%
Chaves County	7%
San Juan County	2%
Valencia County	2%
McKinley County	2%

It's time for New Mexico to catch up with the rest of the nation in waste reduction. In 1993, the state set a goal to achieve 50 percent diversion by 2000.⁷ Needless to say, it has failed to come close. Managing comprehensive data collection is crucial to addressing problems, so to improve, the state needs to increase funding and staff at the state level.

Recent changes in international trade have opened a new window of opportunity for recycling and economic development. For decades, cities throughout the United States sent millions of tons of scrap material to China to be recycled. This past year, China effectively stopped accepting our refuse, claiming it was too contaminated and unsellable for recycling.⁸ With

nowhere to go, recyclables have been piling up in sorting facilities throughout New Mexico and many other states.⁹ This disruption has increased service costs, decreased revenue, and in some cases led recycling collectors to stop their services.¹⁰

As the saying goes, change brings opportunity. Even New Mexico's anemic recycling industry has brought economic benefits through the creation of nearly 7000 jobs.¹¹ In the wake of China's policy changes, New Mexico has an opportunity to further develop its recycling economy through expanded collection, sorting, and end-market solutions.

To improve recycling rates and reduce waste, New Mexico can build off of successful ongoing efforts already taking place across the state. The New Mexico Recycling Coalition (NMRC) has provided grants and connected local rural recycling businesses to loan programs to aid them in improving recycling rates.¹²

Recommendations

Increase landfill tipping fees

Waste collectors pay "tipping fees" by the ton when they dump material into landfills. Because tipping fees are so low, it is often cheaper for waste management companies to send bins of recyclable and compostable materials to landfill rather than ensuring they are diverted (this is becoming more common due to market conditions causing recyclables to pile up at sorting operations¹³). Increasing the cost of dumping at landfills, therefore, can encourage trash collectors to ensure these materials are handled properly. Furthermore, the revenue from a tipping fee raise can go towards improving or introducing recycling and compost infrastructure.

Provide State-Level Support for Recycling Programs and Facilities

In addition to local investment, the state can aid in raising recycling rates with grants and tax incentives. The New Mexico Environment Department has an existing grant program with approximately \$800,000 available annually, which cities should take advantage of as they move towards zero-waste.¹⁴ The state can also provide subsidies or property tax exemptions for recycling and composting facilities and end-use manufacturers. This could incentivize business development and improve the market for recycled materials.

Municipal collaboration

Large projects such as constructing facilities and introducing compost collection have high upfront costs. Neighboring municipalities can pool their resources for such initiatives. In New

Mexico, many jurisdictions rely heavily on a single sorting facility in Albuquerque, which increases transportation costs and creates risk, should its capacity fail.¹⁵

Recycling access for multi-unit apartments and businesses

Recycling for multi-unit apartments and businesses is often referred to as “commercial recycling” and handled by private haulers. It’s hard for many people to access recycling unless their building owner chooses to pay to provide it. Two options to ensure access are to automatically provide service, or require apartments and commercial buildings to provide service. Increased participation inevitably leads to higher recycling rates.

Be S.M.A.R.T. (Save Money And Reduce Trash)

SMART systems (also called “Pay As You Throw”) make a lot of sense. People who request smaller trash bins (thus throwing less away) pay less for trash service. In turn, trash fees provide revenue for curbside recycling and compost collection. A nationwide study showed that the adoption of the SMART system can bring major savings, reduce waste by 14 percent, and increase recycling by over 32 percent.¹⁶

Expand Residential Compost

More than 30 percent of household waste is compostable. This includes food waste, yard waste, and contaminated paper products such as pizza boxes and paper towels. Like recycling, compost allows waste to become useable again. Compost can also be a nutrient-rich resource for gardens, parks, and agriculture. Introducing municipal compost programs as a public service to New Mexico residents could double even the highest recycling rates. Doing so would also support local compost facilities and curb the greenhouse gas impact of landfills.¹⁷

Conclusion

Better recycling practices can limit pollution from landfills, reduce environmental degradation caused by the production of virgin materials, create nutrient rich compost for gardens, parks and open spaces, and protect wildlife from plastic pollution. Despite below average recycling rates, New Mexico has an opportunity to be a recycling leader by investing in recycling solutions to improve its rates and help the environment.

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