



The State of Recycling in Oregon



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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 Oregon 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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Since 2014, Oregon’s recycling rate has steadily declined, from 41 percent to 37 percent.⁵ Although Oregon’s recycling rate remains above the national average of 34.7 percent, the results are well below the state’s goal of achieving 52 percent by 2020 and 55 percent by 2025.⁶ Note that *every single* major county has failed to improve their reduction of waste since 2012. This downward trend will likely continue without serious investment and programmatic change. Here’s how the ten most populous counties and multi-county areas stack up:

Wasteshed ⁷	Change in Recycling Rate 2012-2016	Recycling Rate 2012	Recycling Rate 2016
Lane	-9%	55%	50%
Marion*	-9%	51%	47%
Jackson	-11%	43%	39%
Benton	-14%	41%	36%
Portland Tri-County Area (Clackamas, Multnomah, Washington)	-15%	56%	48%
Linn	-15%	45%	38%
Deschutes	-15%	39%	33%
Yamhill	-17%	37%	31%
Josephine	-29%	50%	36%
Douglas	-34%	41%	27%

Data provided from Oregon DEQ.⁸

*Marion County’s waste to energy is not included as part of recycling rate (thus it appears differently in DEQ reports). See <https://www.oregon.gov/deq/recycling/Pages/Survey.aspx> for raw data.

It’s time for Oregon to reverse the current trend and work toward its stated goals. To do so, the state will have to contend with the effects of recent international trade disputes, which Oregon has felt heavily. For decades, the United States sent millions of tons of scrap material to China to be recycled. This past year, China effectively stopped accepting the refuse, claiming it was too contaminated and unsellable for recycling.⁹ The United States was unprepared for this change in policy. Without China as an export option, recyclables have been piling up in facilities throughout Oregon and other states. This

disruption increased service costs, decreased revenue, and in some cases led recycling collectors to stop their services.¹⁰

As the saying goes, change brings opportunity. Oregon profits from its recycling industry in the form of 2,300 jobs and \$420 million in economic benefits annually¹¹ In the wake of China's policy changes, Oregon has an opportunity to further develop its recycling economy through expanded collection, sorting, and end-market solutions.

Success Stories

To improve recycling rates and reduce waste, Oregon can build off of successful ongoing efforts already taking place across the state. The state has organized a steering committee charged with examining recycling and waste reduction programs in the state.¹² Oregon has also begun to look upstream, encouraging producers to consider the recyclability of their materials. To that end, waste processors have drafted a list of acceptable materials, which are truly recyclable and marketable, as guidelines for municipalities.¹³ Many communities have also implemented education programs to teach consumers how to properly sort and clean recyclables so that facilities receive useable materials.

Oregon has also been a leader in waste reduction policies, as demonstrated by a few key pieces of legislation:

- ❖ Oregon's Bottle Bill incentivizes recycling by giving people a 10 cent rebate for beverage containers returned to redemption centers.¹⁴ States with bottle bills tend to experience much higher container recycling rates.¹⁵
- ❖ The Opportunity to Recycle Act requires curbside collection of recycling for all businesses and residents, including tenants in multi-family buildings, for any town of more than 4000 residents (for smaller towns a drop-off site is required). The bill also emphasizes reduction and reuse through the establishment of a "materials management hierarchy."¹⁶
- ❖ Virtually 100% of Oregon communities operate "Pay-As-You-Throw" systems.¹⁷ Like a utility bill, residents are charged by the amount of trash they throw away (represented by the bin size they request). Recycling services and yard debris collection are built into the garbage rate. Cities are given franchise authority for collection (though a few smaller cities contract private haulers), which allows the local government to control the service prices.¹⁸

Recommendations

Reduce Single-use Plastics

The best way to reduce excess waste is to remove easily replaceable single-use items from the waste stream. Our society relies heavily on single-use items such as plastic bags and styrofoam containers that can be harmful, difficult to recycle, and easily replaced. Already many jurisdictions such as Portland, Hood River, and Medford have introduced and passed local ordinances restricting single-use plastic items such as straws, polystyrene containers, and plastic bags.¹⁹ Oregon should expand these bans statewide to move towards its goals and reduce needless waste.

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 can be cheaper for waste management companies to send bins of recyclable and compostable materials to landfill rather than ensuring they are diverted. This practice may be encouraged by market conditions that cause recyclables to pile up at sorting operations²⁰. 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. Oregon DEQ has an existing grant program with \$500,000 available in 2018, which cities should take advantage of as they move towards zero-waste.²¹ 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 local market for recycled materials, and would relieve our dependence on international markets.

Continue Education Efforts

Recycling dirty or non-recyclable items can lead to contaminated waste streams, causing problems for sorting facilities. To counter, communities in Oregon should continue to implement education programs to teach consumers how to properly sort and clean recyclables so that facilities receive useable materials.

Foster Municipal Collaboration

Large projects such as constructing sorting and end-use facilities have high upfront costs. Neighboring municipalities can pool their resources for such initiatives.

Expand Residential Compost

Around 30 percent of household waste is compostable.²² 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 Oregon residents could double even the highest recycling rates. Doing so would also support local compost facilities and curb the greenhouse gas impact of landfills.²³ Marion County launched a residential organics curbside pick-up in 2010 for Salem and Keizer, and since then Portland and several other jurisdictions have hopped on board²⁴.

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