



The State of Recycling in Wisconsin



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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 it generates 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. end up in a landfill 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 a system’s success to know where energy must be focused. 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 seven most populous cities in Wisconsin, 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 major cities throughout Wisconsin reveal one of the more wasteful states in the nation. Based on the most recent available data, only Madison and Waukesha have managed to eclipse the national average of 34.7 percent (see table below).⁵ Due to a lack of reporting in certain jurisdictions, the state's overall recycling rate is unclear. However, given low rates in major cities, evidence from other states suggests that Wisconsin's statewide rate is even lower than the national average. The table below shows how those cities stack up:

Jurisdiction	Recycling rate
State of Wisconsin	N/A
Madison	54% (2017)
Waukesha	38% (2017)
Milwaukee	25% (2017)
Oshkosh	25%* (2018)
Appleton	24%* (2017)
Green bay	21%* (2018)
Kenosha	19% (2018)

*Does not include yard waste, which, if measured, could increase the rate.

See sources for recycling rate data at bottom of report.

Gathering comprehensive recycling data is crucial to understanding problems, establishing goals, and making improvements. To this point, Wisconsin has not established any statewide goals for waste reduction, recycling, or compost.

Wisconsin has an opportunity address its excessive trash output and catch up with the rest of the nation in waste reduction. Recent changes in international waste 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.⁶ With nowhere to go, recyclables have been piling up in sorting

facilities throughout Wisconsin and many other states.⁷ This disruption has increased service costs, decreased revenue, and in some cases led recycling collectors to stop their services.⁸

As the saying goes, change brings opportunity. Recycling already brings economic benefits in the form of roughly \$1 billion in wages and \$5.7 billion in sales annually.⁹ In the wake of China's policy changes, Wisconsin has an opportunity to further develop its recycling economy through expanded collection, sorting, and end-market solutions previously provided by China.

Success Stories

To improve recycling rates and reduce waste, Wisconsin can build off of successful ongoing efforts already taking place across the state. A statewide committee has been charged with educating consumers to recycling right and reduce contamination.¹⁰ Localities are also investing in valuable infrastructure. Green Bay Packaging Inc. recently announced a plan for a new recycled paper mill, capable of processing corrugated cardboard and mixed paper.¹¹ Meanwhile, the city of Kenosha hopes to introduce an automated recycling system, which uses mechanical arms for collection, to increase recycling rates, but it is waiting on the local government to take action.¹² Milwaukee is also considering an investment in new sorting equipment to create a cleaner recycling bales.¹³

Recommendations

Expand Residential Compost

Around 30 percent of household waste is compostable.¹⁴ 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. Wisconsin already collects 200,000 tons of yard waste every year, but 500,000 tons of food and other organic waste are landfilled each year.¹⁵ Introducing municipal compost programs for *all* organic waste as a public service to Wisconsin residents could raise even the highest recycling rates. Doing so would also support local compost facilities and curb the greenhouse gas impact of landfills.¹⁶ Both Madison and Milwaukee have introduced pilot programs of residential composting programs,¹⁷ but expansion has been limited by a lack of funding.

Enforce Recycling Requirements

The State of Wisconsin bans a comprehensive list of materials from the landfill, including most typical recyclables and yard waste. These restrictions apply to residents and commercial institutions alike.¹⁸ The latter are typically serviced by private haulers, so it is important that

cities monitor and enforce compliance. Citizens can also take action by reporting buildings that do not provide recycling.

Restore local control for plastics laws

One of the best ways to reduce waste is to remove harmful and non-recyclable plastics from the waste stream. Unfortunately, Wisconsin prevents municipalities from regulating items such as plastic bags and polystyrene foam containers, both of which can be replaced with safer, less wasteful materials. The state of Wisconsin should repeal Assembly Bill 730¹⁹ to allow local governments to make decisions regarding plastic in their communities.

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 becoming more common due to market conditions causing recyclables to pile up at sorting operations.²⁰ Increasing the cost of dumping at landfills, therefore, can encourage trash collectors to ensure these materials are handled properly. Furthermore, revenue from higher tipping fees can go towards improving or introducing recycling and compost infrastructure.

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 services, much like a utility bill. 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.²¹

Foster 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.

Provide State-Level Support for Recycling Programs and Facilities

In addition to local investment, the state can aid in raising recycling rates with more grants and tax incentives. Wisconsin has established a grant program to fund local communities, partially offsetting the expense of implementing the state’s mandatory recycling program.²² Increased grant funding would help communities continue to improve and implement new projects. The state can also provide subsidies or property tax exemptions for recycling and composting facilities to incentivize business development.

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