

Executive Summary Increasing Recycling Rates with EPR Policy

The Recycling Partnership supports the adoption of well-designed, effective, efficient, and equitable recycling policies. To advance this work, we set out to understand if the adoption of extended producer responsibility (EPR) programs at the state level would affect recycling rates and other key metrics.

Currently, local governments and taxpayers bear the operational and financial responsibility for the recycling and disposal of packaging and printed paper. EPR policy supports local programs by requiring companies that produce materials to fund recycling programs. EPR fees can also incentivize companies to make packaging recyclable and use recycled content.

Our study of EPR for printed paper and packaging in seven jurisdictions worldwide and in six U.S. states yielded the following key findings:

Key Findings

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U.S. recycling rates are *substantially* lower than recycling rates in jurisdictions with extended producer responsibility (EPR) for packaging and printed paper (PPP).



The analysis of individual states in this study strongly indicates all U.S. states could expect an increase in their recycling rates for PPP with the implementation of an EPR law.



EPR can help ensure universal recycling access, high participation rates, and optimal participant capture behavior, as well as better infrastructure, consistent education, and stable markets.



The Recycling Partnership hopes the demonstrated impact of EPR for PPP on recycling rates depicted in this report will encourage stakeholders to continue supporting new EPR for PPP legislation.



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Breaking Down the Findings

International EPR for printed paper and packaging programs have highly successful outcomes. In the U.S., a number of states have passed EPR policy, and it is likely the trend will continue. This analysis of EPR took a deep dive into worldwide EPR for printed paper and packaging programs and prospective impacts of EPR policy in a sample of U.S. states.

Evidence from jurisdictions abroad demonstrates that U.S. EPR policy will:

- 1. Dramatically increase overall residential recycling rates by as much as 48 percentage points, relative to current U.S. recycling rates. For most U.S. states examined, recycling rates under EPR could be as high as 75%.
- 2. Deliver nearly universal recycling access.
- 3. Deliver increased participation and improve participant capture behavior to drive higher recycling rates.
- 4. Boost the quantity of recycled content by increasing the supply of recyclable materials by millions of tons.
- 5. Recapture between \$13 million and \$91 million in lost material economic value in EPR states across the country.
- 6. Reduce hundreds of thousands of metric tons of climate damaging emissions in EPR states.
- 7. Create thousands of jobs in each state.

Has EPR worked abroad?

The Recycling Partnership examined seven EPR for PPP programs around the world and found that – across the board – the policy drove the collection and recycling of target materials to over 75% in British Columbia, Belgium, Spain, South Korea, and the Netherlands. In Belgium, top recycling rates in 2020 reached 95% despite a global recycling downturn. Across all materials, U.S. state programs performed far lower.

Critical policy and programmatic differences between EPR programs make exact comparisons across jurisdictions difficult, but the following findings highlight why EPR is successful.

	Pre-EPR	With EPR	
British Columbia	50-57%	81%	
Belgium	10%	89.8%	
Spain	4.8%	80.7%	
Netherlands	70%	82%	
South Korea	64%	78%	
Quebec	28%	64%	
Portugal	38%	60.4%	

Access and Participation – EPR jurisdictions provide nearly universal recycling access and report nearly 100% participation. In the U.S., curbside recycling access is stuck at 59%, and curbside participation for those with access is around 72%. For the 21% of U.S. households with drop-off service as their only option, participation may be as low as 30%.

Low-Hanging Fruit – Many materials are easily recyclable and have strong markets. In EPR programs, these materials are captured at very high rates (90%-100%). Even in high-performing U.S. states, readily recyclable materials like cardboard, mixed paper, and PET and HDPE plastic containers have recycling rates in typical collection programs ranging from 50-70%. Closing the gap on easily recycled materials would boost U.S. recycling rates significantly.

Addressing Challenging Materials – Meaningful recycling for materials like films and flexibles do not exist in most U.S. states and inadequate processing infrastructure poses issues for all materials. EPR creates funding to expand recycling for materials currently outside the system.

Why does U.S. recycling need a boost?

The Recycling Partnership examined recycling rates for packaging and paper from across select U.S. states and found that recycling rates were well below jurisdictions with EPR policies in place. Varied recycling rates across U.S. states reflect the variety of existing recycling systems, but every U.S. state could benefit from the recycling rate boost triggered by an EPR policy. Using data from existing EPR programs, The Recycling Partnership calculated the potential increase in U.S. state recycling rates with well-designed EPR policies. Colorado – which has recently adopted an EPR law for packaging and paper – could see recycling rates increase by as many as 48 percentage points.

	Recent Recycling Rate	With EPR	
Washington	52%	75%	
Connecticut	50%	74%	
Wisconsin	34%	66%	
Maryland	31%	70%	
Colorado	21%	70%	
Florida	17%	N/A	

EPR benefits by the numbers

Smart, well-designed EPR programs in U.S. states will provide the financial investment needed to improve recycling infrastructure, ensure 100% access to and participation in recycling for households, and drive recycling rates as much as three times higher than current rates in some states. The generated benefits of investment, equitable access, and higher recycling rates include retaining the economic value of recycled material in the economy, reductions in climate damaging emissions, and job creation to manage the increase in recycled material.

	Washington	Connecticut	Wisconsin	Maryland	Colorado
Recycled Conted (tons)	248,000	129,400	344,200	355,200	441,300
Economic Value of Recycled Material	\$34 million	\$13 million	\$53 million	\$43 million	\$91 million
GHG Reductions (MTCO ₂ E)	841,600	370,200	953,100	1,001,900	1,111,200

For more information, please refer to The Recycling Partnership's Increasing Recycling Rates with EPR Policy white paper.