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We have made great strides in recycling in the last 25 years, establishing a basic foundation that now allows us to take a systems approach in effecting the next leap forward, following other developed nations in achieving high material recovery rates.

Our experience over the last twenty-five years, what we might call Recycling Phase I, provides a clear map for the journey forward. We know what works, we just need to accelerate it, scale it, and improve it. Carts ramp up curbside performance. Twinned bins away from home help people choose recycling over garbage. Hub & spoke helps rural communities reach distant MRFs. The right state policies and targeted funding build critical infrastructure. Consistent education works. The right incentives and support turn “wastes” into “commodities.” Concerted private sector action changes the fate of discarded materials. And there are also unintended consequences of progress (e.g., single stream collection and contamination). In short, we have a long list of lessons to rely on moving ahead.

The biggest lesson may be that the right combination of integrated regulatory and funding mechanisms can drive step changes in system performance. Many of the foundational state recycling laws of the late 1980s combined mandates and grant programs that helped get us where we are today. In some cases, mandates such as disposal bans have linked with funding strategies such as tipping fee surcharges to create a jump in recovery. Can the next leap in the system be achieved with a similar approach? The answer is a hopeful yes.

It is essential for recycling industry corporations, commodity groups, packaging organizations, and brand owners to resource and drive this process. Government agencies are hamstrung and in a weak position to move forward on policy and funding. Ultimately, private sector actors directly benefit from integrated initiatives that increase the supply of energy efficient recovered materials to their industrial processes. U.S. industry must advocate for its own sustainable materials future, helping to put recycling at the center of national and state economic development policy. Their competitors in China are already doing that very thing.

It is also important for EPA to help catalyze improvement to the system. We have lagged behind many other developed countries in part because of a vacuum of national focus and leadership. EPA has done excellent work to document the enormous cross-media environmental benefits of recycling and has also contributed to the understanding of recycling’s vast economic benefits. It is time for EPA to put that information to work in active programs that take us to the next level.

EPA has an immediate opportunity to convene stakeholders, foster meaningful dialogue, and build commitment to action. EPA’s Sustainable Financing Dialogue is an indicator of the beneficial role EPA can play. One can draw a straight line between that process and the birth of a groundbreaking example of private support for public recycling programs, CVP’s Recycling Partnership. Can EPA take the next step, and rally stakeholders around an ambitious set of actions and goals to improve recycling? We need that kind of leadership, and the leadership of private sector actors, to create Recycling Phase II.

National SMM Plan Recommendations

- Rally recycling industry corporations, commodity groups, packaging organizations, and brand owners to resource and drive coordinated development of policy and financing mechanisms to take recycling to the next level.
- Encourage EPA to convene stakeholders in processes that build consensus on major initiatives to improve recycling in the U.S.