



The State of Recycling in Minnesota



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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 cities in Minnesota based on their residential recycling rates.

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

The State of Recycling in Minnesota

Recycling rates in major cities throughout Minnesota reveal one of the better states in the nation in terms of waste management. Yet, there is still plenty of room for improvement. According to the most recent study, Minnesota’s statewide recycling rate of 43.6 percent⁵ eclipses the 2015 national average of 34.7 percent.⁶ Part of Minnesota’s success can be attributed to the creation of specific goals and strategies. By 2030, Minnesota plans to achieve a 75 percent recycling rate for counties in the Twin Cities Metro area and a 35 percent rate in Greater Minnesota by 2030.⁷

Here’s how the ten most populous counties stack up:

Jurisdiction	Recycling and Composting Rate (2016) ⁸
State of Minnesota	44%
Scott County	58%
St. Louis County	52%
Anoka County	52%
Dakota County	47%
Olmstead County	47%
Stearns County	43%
Washington County	42%
Hennepin County	37%
Ramsey County	36%
Wright County	20%

To reach its goals, Minnesota will have to contend with the effects of recent international trade disputes. For decades, 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.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 Minnesota and many other states. This disruption has increased service costs, decreased revenue, and in some cases led recycling collectors to limit their services.¹⁰

As the saying goes, change brings opportunity. Recycling in Minnesota already brings economic benefits in the form of \$690 million in revenue from collection, and 37,000 jobs supported by the industry (which adds nearly \$8.5 billion to the state economy).¹¹ Furthermore, hundreds of Minnesota companies purchase and manufacture products using recycled materials.¹² In the wake of China's policy changes, Minnesota has an opportunity to further develop its recycling economy through expanded collection, sorting, and end-market solutions previously provided by China.

Success Stories

Minnesota has launched a number of initiatives to reduce waste and increase recycling. Each Minnesotan county is required to have a solid waste plan, with a timeline and a budget, which must be monitored by the commissioner.¹³ The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency assists the counties in reaching their goals with a grant program that prioritizes new programs.¹⁴ Many jurisdictions have implemented programs to reduce recycling contamination, with certain haulers charging extra for highly contaminated loads.¹⁵

Minnesota has also been a leader in waste reduction policies, which include the following.

- ❖ On Earth Day 2015, Minneapolis introduced a Green-to-Go ordinance, requiring food service items prepared for immediate consumption to be in reusable, recyclable, or compostable packaging, similar legislation passed in St. Louis Park in 2017, and recently in Afton.^{16 17}
- ❖ Minnesota requires recycling for commercial buildings in the Metro Area and any building that produce over four cubic yards of trash per week. These include businesses and multi-family buildings.¹⁸
- ❖ Minnesota exempts compost sent to organics facilities and recycling (provided it reduces the volume of waste by at least 85 percent) from the state Solid Waste Tax¹⁹

Recommendations

Expand Residential Compost

Only 11 percent of waste in Minnesota is composted, though up to 31 percent could be, given sufficient infrastructure.²⁰ 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. Minneapolis has introduced residential compost collection, paid for by all residents, but a resident must opt-in to receive a cart for pick-up.²¹ St. Paul's compost program is drop-off only.²² Expanding curbside municipal compost programs as a public service to all Minnesotans, beginning in Metro area counties, could raise even the highest recycling rates. Doing so would also support local compost facilities and curb the greenhouse gas impact of incinerators and landfills.²³

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, Minnesota 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 Minnesota should repeal HF 1504 and allow local governments to make decisions regarding plastic in their communities.

Setting a Floor for Single-Use Plastics

While it's important to give municipalities and counties control over most aspects of waste management, there are some types of single use plastics that are dangerous, dirty, and very hard to recycle. Polystyrene — which many people know as Styrofoam — permanently stays in our ecosystem. It breaks into smaller and smaller pieces, posing a threat to wildlife and human life alike. Minneapolis and St. Louis Park have already worked to eliminate polystyrene from the food service industry. Eliminating it statewide would ease the burden on recyclers and other waste management organizations — and encourage the use of sustainable, green materials instead. New Jersey's proposed SB 2776 is an excellent model for Minnesota to follow:

https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/2018/Bills/S3000/2776_I1.PDF

Look Upstream

Minnesota already relies on local markets for sales of much of their recyclables, which has cushioned the impacts from export restrictions. However, there is now an increasingly competitive domestic market for recycled products due to the surge in supply across the country. Large companies with headquarters in Minnesota should work with the recycling

industry to produce more products from recycled materials, and avoid more environmentally damaging raw extraction.

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, 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.²⁴

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 Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has an existing grant program, but in recent years a portion of that grant fund has been diverted to the general fund.²⁵ The state should ensure the grant program remains robust, allowing for cities to use it as a resource for moving towards zero-waste.²⁶ The state can also provide subsidies or property tax exemptions for recycling and composting facilities and end-use manufacturers using recycled products. This could incentivize business development and improve the market for recycled materials.

Increase incinerator and landfill tipping fees

Waste collectors pay “tipping fees” by the ton when they dump material into incinerators (known commonly as Waste to Energy), and landfills. Unfortunately, dumping waste in an incinerator or landfill is often cheaper than recycling or composting, even though it has more negative costs to public health and the environment. Waste to Energy is even subsidized in Washington, Ramsey, and Hennepin Counties²⁷, counteracting a raised tipping fee, and passing the cost to taxpayers. If tipping fees were appropriately higher than recycling and composting fees, collectors would be incentivized to develop recycling and compost infrastructure. Further, a raised tipping fee would bring in revenue which could go to fund better infrastructure and programs.

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