



Public works agencies across the country face an array of increasing challenges as they seek to provide their communities with effective, accessible, and high-quality recycling services/programs, as outlined in the key areas below:

Lack of Domestic Processing/Usage



In January 2018, the People's Republic of China implemented the 'National Sword' policy, banning the importation of most waste from foreign nations. This policy reversal by China highlighted a deficiency in North American ability to remanufacture products from recycled paper, cardboard, and plastics. Many public works agencies had relied on China as a buyer of these recycled products to generate revenue for their communities.



Without increased usage of recycled materials in America, municipalities will continue to struggle to find reliable and sustainable end markets for their recyclables. This will route recyclable materials into landfills and hinder local and national sustainability and economic initiatives.

Capture/Recycling Issues

The cost of collecting and delivering residential and commercial recyclables for sorting and processing has continued to increase. In particular, the sorting costs have increased by two to three times in recent years, which has significantly impacted APWA members and the communities they serve.



Multifamily communities are a particular area of concern. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) their recycling rate is only 14% and a higher level of nonrecyclables is found in their recycled waste, driving up the cost of sorting.



Recovery infrastructure is lacking, aging, and often not up to current standards needed to produce market-spec commodities; with waste exports to China being restricted, the required quality of recycled material has increased. Consequently, this raises the costs for local governments to construct and operate more advanced recycling facilities capable of meeting these requirements.

Technology Advancements



The sophistication of technology used in recycling facilities is rapidly accelerating. The increased usage of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotic sorting may bring significant benefits to recycling capabilities of public works agencies if the technology becomes more widely adopted. These technologies can reduce labor costs, improve sorting efficiency, and ensure quality control to avoid contamination. Currently, the high cost of this technology restricts usage to high-capacity and/or well-funded facilities; often public works agencies lack either funding or the agility to make these investments overnight. However, as research, development, and deployment of AI and more automated recycling systems become operational, recycling will likely become a more viable opportunity for U.S. communities.



Extended Producer Responsibility



Extended producer responsibility (EPR) laws have been passed in several states and recently been considered at the federal level. These laws seek to hold producers or manufacturers of certain products (packaging, paper, beverage containers) fiscally responsible for the collection, management, and recycling of said products after their use by consumers. Effectively done, this has the potential to reduce municipal expenses to collect and recycle these products.



Continued passage of EPR laws at the state level may create a patchwork of waste management regulations. This could inhibit the ability of state and local governments to participate in a coordinated national recycling strategy. As the federal government contemplates national policy, APWA members can be a valuable resource to ensure federal efforts work in collaboration with local efforts to achieve the common mission of increased materials recovery and remanufacture into new product.



Recycling in Small/Rural Communities

Smaller local governments face challenges when attempting to implement recycling collection for their communities. Specifically, many are particularly impacted by rising costs in the following ways:



Increased costs passed down through collection/processing contracts with private waste management companies can limit cities' and counties' provision of recycling services;



After a recycling program is terminated for budgetary reasons, the expense for restarting the program may preclude smaller municipalities from reinvestment;



Over time these challenges widen the gap in recycling infrastructure, where smaller and more rural communities have the most limited access compared to larger/more urban populations

Policymaker Primers supplement APWA's official Public Policy Priorities, providing additional information and context for issues that do not strictly fall into the categories of transportation, water resiliency, or emergency management.

The American Public Works Association (APWA)

represents over 30,000 public works professionals across North America, dedicated to providing essential, high-quality equitable and sustainable services to millions of people in rural and urban communities, both small and large.

APWA members serve in both the public and private sectors, providing expertise to the local, state, and federal government levels. Working in the public interest, our members plan, design, build, operate and maintain, and oversee America's vast infrastructure networks essential to our nation's economy, environment, safety, and way of life.

APWA collaborates with all levels of government and supports federal investment in our shared infrastructure. APWA is opposed to unfunded mandates and any effort to impede the appropriate use of public right-of-way, and strongly encourages

industry to partner with public works, and all state and local government entities.

APWA supports federal investment and support for professional development training initiatives, including investment in apprenticeships, grants, career and technical education programs, to assist with the growth and utilization of innovative activities related to having a diverse, high-quality public works workforce.

It is important that federal regulations do not become onerous and burdensome to localities in their use of advancing technologies.

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