THE STATE OF RECYCLING & COMPOSTING IN COLORADO

10th EDITION



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

eco-cycle 50 Community-Based Zero Waste Since 1976

CoPIRG Foundation

This is the 10th edition of a report originally known as The State of Recycling in Colorado that was launched in 2017 to call attention to a critical gap: at that time, despite Colorado's green reputation, only a scattering of communities had effective recycling programs. In that first report, Eco-Cycle and CoPIRG made the case that local governments and the State needed to take dramatic action by passing policies and funding infrastructure and programming to create truly circular economies. In a circular economy, we reduce the extraction of natural resources, keep resources in use for as long as possible, and design waste out of the whole system. The benefits are significant: less pollution, less reliance on extractive industries, lower costs, less energy and water use, more green jobs, resilient local supply chains, and a healthier food and agricultural system.

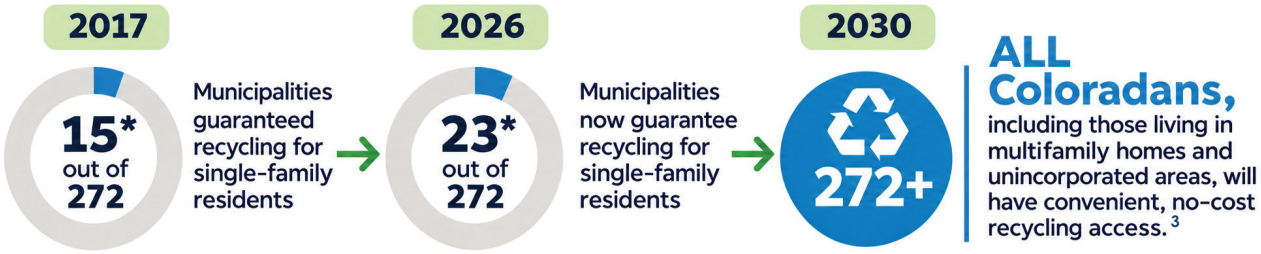
This year's report documents that, over the past decade, Colorado has made important progress toward building a true circular economy that supports reducing, reusing, recycling, and composting. We look back at what has been accomplished, highlighting the progress of the past year, and we call on Governor-Elect Weiser and members of the 76th Colorado General Assembly to build on the momentum we've created together as a state.

Progress in the Past Decade

When we released the inaugural report in 2017, Colorado was far behind the rest of the country in terms of reducing, reusing, recycling, and composting. Today, the state is moving from Zero Waste laggard to emerging leader across all four areas. We were the first non-coastal state to ban plastic checkout bags and expanded polystyrene takeout containers, the third state to adopt Producer Responsibility for packaging and paper, and one of the first to adopt Producer Responsibility for loose batteries and EV batteries. We are also leading the nation when it comes to protecting Coloradans' ability to fix their things—three Right-to-Repair laws mean Coloradans have the broadest repair rights of any state in the country.

Local governments have also made tremendous progress in the past decade by adopting meaningful policies to expand access to recycling and composting and to reduce waste. For example, of the 37 communities that responded to our survey this year, 23 guarantee recycling access to all single-family residents through ordinances, municipal hauling programs, or municipal contracts. That is up from 15 communities that guaranteed recycling access to all single-family residents in 2017.[1] By 2030, thanks to Producer Responsibility, ALL Colorado residents living in both single-family homes and multifamily homes will have access to recycling in all 272 municipalities and unincorporated areas of the state.[2]

Colorado's Recycling Revolution:
From Limited Access to Access for All



** Based on the 37 municipalities that responded to our survey*

Progress in the Past Year

Colorado continued to make progress in 2025 and 2026. In addition to celebrating some of the many champions working to build true circularity in Colorado, this year's report details specific actions taken and successes achieved by Colorado businesses, communities, and the State in the past year. Some progress achieved since our last report includes:

- **Composting:** For the second year in a row, Colorado increased the total amount of organic material diverted from landfills. Food scraps composted rose from 110,000 tons in 2024 to 235,000 tons in 2025. Still, we landfill nearly four times more organic material than we divert through composting and mulching combined.[4]
- **Recycling:** After four years of planning, Producer Responsibility for packaging and paper started implementing free access to recycling in 2026. By 2030, the rollout will expand recycling to 700,000 additional households, ensuring all Coloradans have free recycling access.[5]
- **Hard-to-recycle materials:** In 2026, Colorado added an electric-vehicle battery law and started rulemaking for its small- and medium-format battery law. The collection of automotive containers began under the Producer Responsibility for Packaging law and PaintCare continues to be a successful model for Producer Responsibility.
- **Reuse:** Colorado made important strides in reuse as a number of communities partnered with Retrocycle to start reusable cup programs, and the City of Boulder and Eco-Cycle launched the Reuse Hub online map and platform showcasing reuse and repair businesses in the Front Range. Significant policy wins included the beginning of implementation for Right to Repair for consumer electronics in January 2026, and the successful lobbying of the Recycle Colorado Construction & Deconstruction Council to get the International Code Council to adopt allowances for salvaged lumber in its 2027 building code update.[6]

- **Waste reduction:** Of the 37 communities responding to our survey, 28 responded that they now are implementing single-use plastic reduction laws, up from only three in 2017.[7] We estimate that between 4.1 billion and 5.8 billion single-use checkout bags have not been put on Colorado markets thanks to the Plastic Pollution Reduction Act's implementation, which started in 2023.[8] We continue to see waste reduction benefits from single-use checkout bag bans, including in Denver, which reported a 99% reduction in single-use plastic checkout bags since their ban went into effect.[9]

Priorities for the Future

While Colorado has made significant policy progress, and we're beginning to see forward momentum to reduce, reuse, recycle, and compost, the State and local communities have more work to do. To make the next decade the one where Colorado truly becomes a national leader in Zero Waste and the circular economy, we call on Governor-Elect Weiser and the legislature to:

- Incorporate Zero Waste strategies and consumption-based emissions into the State's climate plans.
- Lead by example, starting with state agencies and projects in areas such as expanding reuse, recycling, and composting at state agencies; using compost on state infrastructure projects; deconstructing instead of demolishing state buildings; and using reclaimed materials in new construction.
- Ensure Producer Responsibility programs deliver on their goals of providing equitable access to recycling for all Coloradans, incentivizing better designs for products that minimize and eliminate waste and toxics and increase the use of postconsumer recycled content, as well as creating a recycling system Coloradans can trust to verifiably and transparently turn recyclable packaging into new products.
- Adopt Producer Responsibility for other problematic materials such as electronics (including single-use vapes), mattresses, carpets, and pharmaceuticals.
- Grow our circular organics economy with an organics resource recovery requirement for large generators and continued investments for Colorado businesses and communities so that they can grow organics diversion capacity and provide more finished compost to agricultural lands and public infrastructure projects.
- Enact policies that ensure that the extraction, processing, and disposal of materials does not disproportionately impact lower-income communities and communities of color.
- Reduce unnecessary plastic waste by passing Skip the Stuff legislation, where restaurants no longer automatically distribute single-use food ware accessories.
- Protect Coloradans from toxics in packaging and waste-to-fuel facilities.

As we move into 2027 and beyond, Colorado needs to build off the work we have done and ensure we have a future of less waste and pollution, an economy based on circular systems with less natural resource extraction, and more resilient communities. We stand ready to work with the new governor, legislature, and community leaders around the state to make it happen. With strong leadership, the economic, social, and environmental benefits of recycling, composting, reuse, and waste reduction can be fully realized.

Endnotes

1 See municipal responses on page 41of the full report.

2 CDPHE. "Producer Responsibility Program." cdphe.colorado.gov/hm/epr-program. Accessed 10/29/26.

3 See municipal responses on page 41 of the full report. And CDPHE. "Producer Responsibility Program." cdphe.colorado.gov/hm/epr-program. Accessed 10/29/26.

4 CDPHE. "Waste Diversion Totals." cdphe.colorado.gov/hm/colorado-recycling-totals. Accessed 10/14/26.

5 CDPHE presentation to the Colorado General Assembly Joint Budget Committee. 4/12/24.

6 Recycle Colorado. "Material Spotlight: Salvage Lumber." recyclecolorado.org/material-spotlight-salvage-lumber. Accessed 10/14/2026.

7 See municipal responses on page 41 of the full report.

8 Eco-Cycle calculation based on state population from CDPHE. "Waste Diversion Totals: Diversion Overview." cdphe.colorado.gov/hm/colorado-recycling-totals. Accessed 10/28/26. National Geographic. "Fast Facts About Plastic Pollution." (2018) nationalgeographic.com/science/article/plastics-facts-infographics-ocean-pollution. City of Aspen. "Single-Use Bag Study." (2017) aspen.gov/DocumentCenter/View/687/City-of-Aspen-Single-Use-Bag-Study-PDF?bidId=vi. City of Boulder. "Disposable Bag Fee." bouldercolorado.gov/services/disposable-bag-fee. Accessed 10/23/23.

9 City and County of Denver Office of Climate Action, Sustainability, and Resiliency (CASR). "Building Denver's Climate Future: 2025 Annual Report." denvergov.org/files/assets/public/v/3/climate-action/documents/cpf/annual-reports/casr-2025-annual-report-2026-10-05.pdf. Accessed 10/19/2026.