

Colorado recycling rate worsens but leading cities' recycling and composting efforts demonstrate successful model for the state

Leading recycling cities include Boulder, Loveland, Aspen, Durango, and Fort Collins. New report calls for more aggressive action to improve recycling and composting statewide.

DENVER - As Colorado Recycles Week kicks off, a [new report](#) revealed Colorado's recycling rate in 2019 dropped from 17.2% to 15.9%, less than half the national average of 35%. Coloradans sent 6.1 million tons of municipal waste to landfills, over 90% of which could have been recycled or composted to the benefit of the climate and the local economy.

Despite the downward trend, the annual *State of Recycling in Colorado Report*, co-authored by Eco-Cycle and CoPIRG, also featured updated city-by-city recycling rates and held up the cities of Boulder, Loveland, Aspen, Durango, and Fort Collins as leaders.

2 **FIGURE 2: COLORADO'S GOLD-MEDAL WINNERS FOR BEST RECYCLING IN 2019^{est}**

| FRONT RANGE | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-----|
| Best citywide recycling rate—residential and commercial | City of Boulder | 51% |
| Best residential recycling rate—residential only | City of Loveland | 60% |
| Best county-level recycling rate | Boulder County | 37% |
| Best industrial recycling rate | City of Fort Collins | 67% |
| GREATER COLORADO | | |
| Best citywide recycling rate | Cities of Aspen and Durango | 33% |
| Best county-level recycling rate | Pitkin County | 38% |

* See Appendix for details on data collection terminology and how rates are calculated.

“We were initially discouraged by our report findings that Colorado recycled less and wasted more—two trends moving in the wrong direction,” said Kate Bailey, Policy & Research Director at Eco-Cycle and lead author on the report. “But when we look beyond the numbers, we see many model Colorado communities using proven solutions, and growing national momentum to rebuild recycling as the foundation of a circular economy.”

Concluded Bailey, “To build on these signs of progress, we need much stronger initiatives and specific systemic changes to truly accelerate waste reduction and recovery in Colorado.”

“We produce too much waste but a number of Colorado cities have demonstrated yet again that huge amounts of it can be diverted away from landfills,” said Danny Katz, Executive Director of CoPIRG. “The waste we are diverting, to be recycled or composted, is helping us reduce climate pollution and foster a more circular economy that’s better for both the planet and our quality of life.”

The new report highlighted that Colorado is not on pace to meet its goal of diverting 28% of waste away from the landfill by 2021. Eco-Cycle and CoPIRG noted that efforts for improvement should be focused on Front Range communities, which collectively produce about 87% of the total waste in the state. Notably, Front Range residents produce over 475 extra pounds of waste per person every year compared to residents living in the Greater Colorado area.

According to Eco-Cycle and CoPIRG, providing convenient curbside recycling to all residents, particularly those along the Front Range, is one of the most important and proven steps cities can take to improve recycling in Colorado. Unfortunately, many cities with populations over 10,000 -- such as Colorado Springs, Aurora, Lakewood, Westminster, Pueblo, Centennial, Greeley, Broomfield, and Littleton -- don’t automatically provide all residents with curbside recycling as a part of their trash service. Addressing this deficit is an obvious first step to increasing statewide diversion.

Despite a disappointing year for recycling, the report highlights several significant bright spots around the state:

- The cities of Aspen, Boulder, Durango, Fort Collins, and Loveland are leading the way as the top recycling programs in the state, with Boulder at the lead, diverting 50% of its waste from the landfill.
- The City of Arvada, the seventh-largest city in Colorado, adopted a new curbside recycling program to increase convenient access to recycling for over 30,000 households, becoming the largest city in the state with a contract to provide recycling to every single-family home.
- Mountain and rural areas, collectively considered Greater Colorado, have already surpassed the 2021 recycling goals set by the state.
- Businesses and municipalities continue to expand composting programs to manage organic materials such as leftover food and yard debris. In fact, organics programs have grown fivefold since 2010 and momentum is building for a state-wide organics management plan.

The report concludes that Colorado can do better. Colorado residents recycle and compost only 1.1 pounds per person per day, while residents in leading states like Oregon and Washington recycle 3 pounds per person per day—nearly three times more than Colorado residents. The report lays out two big changes needed to greatly accelerate recycling in Colorado.

First, every resident with curbside trash collection should also have curbside recycling. This is a proven step taken by 38 Colorado cities and towns.

FIGURE 6. LESS THAN HALF OF COLORADO MUNICIPALITIES WITH 10,000 OR MORE RESIDENTS AUTOMATICALLY PROVIDE CURBSIDE RECYCLING FOR ALL HOUSEHOLDS.* xxviii



All residents have access to curbside recycling automatically

Denver
Fort Collins
Thornton
Arvada**
Boulder
Longmont
Loveland
Commerce City
Northglenn
Lafayette
Evans
Louisville
Golden
Montrose
Durango
Greenwood Village
Frederick
Fruita
Steamboat Springs
Superior
Lone Tree



Residents must subscribe to curbside recycling

Colorado Springs
Aurora
Lakewood
Westminster
Pueblo
Centennial
Greeley
Broomfield
Castle Rock
Grand Junction
Parker
Littleton
Brighton
Englewood
Wheat Ridge
Windsor
Erie
Cañon City
Firestone
Johnstown
Federal Heights
Fort Morgan
Castle Pines
Wellington

** Defined as residential properties with less than eight units and not including homeowners' associations; multifamily properties are considered commercial accounts based on state law. Listed in descending order of population. At least 17 additional smaller Colorado communities and some unincorporated county areas also provide curbside recycling for all residents.*

*** Program approved in 2020, to launch in July 2021.*

Second, Colorado needs to address the challenges with funding recycling. States across the U.S. are turning toward Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) policies that require producers

to fund the recycling system, rather than local and state governments or ratepayers. This groundbreaking shift toward a producer-funded recycling system could help Colorado to increase its recycling rates, provide more residents with greater access to recycling services, invest in needed recycling infrastructure, and reduce costs to households and local governments.

“An EPR policy for packaging and paper products would provide the needed investment in infrastructure, services, and education to accelerate Colorado’s recycling economy and can be done without burdening local governments or residents. We’re excited that CDPHE is currently studying these options and think this is priority legislation for Colorado in the coming years,” said Bailey.

The State of Recycling Report included a number of recommendations for state and local action to help increase recycling rates including:

1. Transition to a recycling system funded by the product makers, not by taxpayers, by supporting new EPR policies.
2. Provide curbside recycling to all residents in municipalities that have curbside trash collection.
3. Develop a statewide organic management plan to continue to drive more composting programs and facilities, and to highlight composting as a climate solution.
4. Accelerate the creation of the new market development center called for in recently passed state legislation to bring more businesses to Colorado to use our recycled materials and create more economic value locally.
5. Allow cities to take action to reduce plastic pollution by repealing state legislation that prevents communities from banning plastic.
6. Increase access to recycling at underserved multi-family properties and small businesses.
7. Lead by example at the state agency level by providing recycling and composting (where available) at all state facilities, purchase compost for state construction and transportation projects, and recycling at least 50% of construction debris in all state-sponsored building projects.

The report can be found [HERE](#)

###

Eco-Cycle is a Zero Waste pioneer and one of the nation’s oldest and largest nonprofit recyclers. Eco-Cycle innovates, implements, and advocates for local and global Zero Waste solutions to foster a more regenerative, equitable, and climate-resilient future. For more information: www.ecocycle.org

CoPIRG, the Colorado Public Interest Research Group, is an advocate for the public interest. We speak out for a healthier, safer world in which we’re freer to pursue our own individual well-being and the common good. Visit us at www.copirg.org.