

## Focus on: Creating a sustainable recycling system



### Contact information

Julie Robertson

360-407-6132

[Julie.Robertson@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:Julie.Robertson@ecy.wa.gov)

Laurie Davies

360-407-6103

[Laurie.Davies@ecy.wa.gov](mailto:Laurie.Davies@ecy.wa.gov)

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### Proposed Legislation

This proposed legislation aims to improve Washington's recycling system by helping to reduce contamination and incentivize markets for recyclable materials. Chapter 70.95 RCW will be amended to require the state and local governments to develop and implement Contamination Reduction and Outreach Plans for recyclable materials. Chapter 70.93 RCW will be amended to change the distribution of revenue from the litter tax.

The bill authorizes the creation of a Recycling Development Center that will operate within the Department of Ecology and contract with the Department of Commerce. The Center will conduct research to assist with the development of new markets for recycled commodities. It will also identify recycling best practices and include a policy board comprised of public and private sector stakeholders. The bill provides grant funding for solid waste management planning for local governments.

### The problem

The once-thriving recyclable commodities market has collapsed because the government of China placed restrictive new rules on recycling imports. And there are not sufficient alternative markets to handle the material China no longer accepts. Commodities such as paper and plastic are piling up or being sent to landfills. Washington's robust recycling rate – a national leader at about 50% – is at risk of buckling. Packaging materials are also changing at a rapid pace, which means the recycling system is continually asked to respond. Research and development is needed to help identify alternative markets to increase the use of recycled materials.

## The next step to creating a sustainable solution

China's market restrictions place Washington's and U.S. recycling systems at risk. Washington must respond to keep the recycling crisis from worsening, and work to create a more sustainable recycling system. This work will include a coordinated, multi-faceted approach that focuses on bolstering domestic processing and markets, improving solid waste infrastructure, and reducing contamination of the recycling waste stream.

## Ecology's proposal and funding

The proposed legislation has two facets. One, create a Recycling Development Center through a collaboration of public and private stakeholders, including departments of Ecology and Commerce, to research, develop, expand, and incentivize markets for recycled commodities. Two, create and implement a statewide Contamination Reduction and Outreach Plan, and require local planning jurisdictions to either create and implement individual plans for their communities, or use the statewide plan. By reducing contamination these plans will help increase the quality and marketability of materials collected.

Governor Inslee's 2019-21 budget proposal includes \$6 million of new funding to address the state's recycling crisis, and to restore successful litter control and waste reduction programs that were previously cut.

## How it will benefit Washington

Washington residents are passionate about recycling. Before the market collapse, about half of the residential waste produced in the state was diverted from landfills for recycling or other beneficial uses. The energy savings from recycling and recovering these materials was enough to power 600,000 households. It also prevented one million tons of greenhouse gas from being released to the environment. And recent studies estimate that recycling 1,000 tons of material generates \$14,000 in tax revenue and 12 jobs.

Through this proposal, Washington has an opportunity to help make recycling effective and more sustainable for the long term.

The recycling crisis will not resolve by itself. Failing to act may provide a path to further weaken the system as bales of sorted material continue to pile up or are thrown away.

