Positives of Plastic

Plastics Recycling in the USA – by the Numbers

Improving nationwide recycling by increasing investments in infrastructure supports a circular economy and leverages plastics' potential for reuse while keeping waste out of the environment. A recent **study** by the United States National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL) found that in addition to decreasing plastic waste, a fully circular plastics economy could save the United States up to **$9.9 billion** annually.

Recovering and recycling plastic products saves energy and valuable materials.

Plastic products belong in a circular economy where they can be reused and transformed into new products. Advanced and traditional recycling systems are complementary and crucial for recovery and reuse—ensuring plastics are diverted from landfills and find second lives as new products.

In 2019, the energy value of plastic waste in landfills **could have powered 5% of the U.S. transportation sector.**

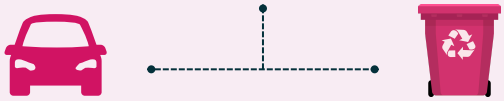
Recycling one ton of redirected post-consumer plastic waste saves **5,774 kilowatt hours (kWh)** of energy—enough for average electric vehicles to travel **between 14,500 and 23,000 miles.**

Manufacturing one ton of plastic containers with recycled PET saves 7,200 kWh of energy—enough to power **the average U.S. home** for over 8 months.

Recycling is more challenging at the state level without a comprehensive national strategy

The U.S. government has mainly depended on local and state governments to enact their own waste management and recycling definitions and strategies. With no federal laws defining recycling, states and even counties are left with a patchwork of inconsistent legislation, policies, and infrastructure that can do more harm than good. Ultimately, consumers, producers, and the broader economy often bear the brunt of this challenge.

Limited funding forces local governments to make tradeoffs in community recycling.



Lacking public funding for curbside collection, residents of Pasco, West Richland, and Benton County, Washington, must personally bring their recyclables to local collection sites or material recovery facilities (MRFs).

Kennewick, Washington contracts a private waste collection company for scheduled curbside pickup and sorting of comingled recyclable and nonrecyclable products; the company spreads collection costs across various service regions, something the county can't do, but only collects certain recyclables.

Fairfax County, VA, only collects recycling for 10% of county residents who have to petition for the service and pay through county taxes.

Even within counties, recycling programs differ, creating confusion over appropriate disposal methods.

90% of Fairfax County residents have their recycling collected by private recycling companies, but the varying procedures and accepted materials across companies creates confusion.

More than one million Americans work in jobs directly or indirectly connected to the plastics industry, spanning a wide range of sectors. From the engineers who design the machinery that manufactures essential plastic products, to the material suppliers distributing raw plastics, to the processors shaping materials into goods, and the recyclers giving used plastic a second life, the plastics supply chain is a vital aspect within both the U.S. and global economy.