

An Examination of Recycling Programs in Rural Pennsylvania, 2010-2019

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Key Findings:

- Local recycling programs are impacted by global markets and constraints;
- Contamination of recyclable materials has decreased the value of materials collected;
- Recycling programs rely on state funding to operate;
- Recycling provides environmental and economic benefits to Pennsylvania; and
- Declining recycling program revenues and rising recycling program costs are affecting the sustainability of recycling programs in Pennsylvania.

Key Policy Considerations

- Make recycling a state priority and replenish the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection's managed Recycling Fund, established by Act 101;
- Restructure how funds may be used under Section 902 - Grants for Development and Implementation of Municipal Recycling Programs;
- Provide financial resources needed to invest in educational campaigns and websites that promote recycling services, particularly in rural communities that are not mandated to provide recycling programs;
- Provide incentives for the establishment and growth of local markets for recyclable materials by encouraging processors and end-users of Pennsylvania recyclables to locate and expand business in the state;
- Address restrictions imposed by the Covered Device Recycling Act (CDRA) of 2010 and increase access to electronics recycling, particularly for rural residents; and
- Address problems with offering consistent, unrestricted access to household hazardous waste recycling collection in rural locations.

Background and Findings

The Municipal Waste Planning, Recycling, and Waste Reduction Act of 1988 (Act 101) currently mandates recycling in 475 municipalities, accounting for 68 percent of Pennsylvania's residents. More than 586 other municipalities have voluntarily executed recycling collection programs. In total, more than 94 percent of Pennsylvania residents have access to public recycling programs. However, in the last several years, increasing costs associated with collection, and decreasing revenues associated with a decrease in the prices received for materials collected in recycling programs, have led to a number of

non-mandated Pennsylvania municipalities to cancel and/or strongly consider suspending their recycling programs.

This study examined the status of recycling programs in rural Pennsylvania to better understand the geographic extent and availability of recycling programs and services. It looked to fully capture the economic and environmental benefits of the recycling industry, particularly in rural Pennsylvania, to develop a better understanding of the challenges posed by recent changes and associated impacts on residential programs in rural counties. The research addressed four primary goals: (1) to better un-

derstand the geographic extent and availability of recycling programs and services offered to residents in rural Pennsylvania counties, using the Center for Rural Pennsylvania’s rural definition; (2) to describe modifications to recycling programs and services to rural residents over time and the factors responsible for such changes; (3) to document changes in residential municipal solid waste (MSW) generation by weight (total tons) and recyclable materials, respectively, in rural counties compared to urban counties; and (4) to identify important demographic characteristics of rural counties compared to urban counties that may influence the geographic extent and availability of recycling programs and services.

The research used quantitative and qualitative data to better understand the status of recycling services and programs offered to county residents and the specific challenges for the recycling industry in rural Pennsylvania. The study period was 2010 to 2019. Primary data were collected from a web-based survey conducted in 2020 of all Pennsylvania counties that were both mandated and non-mandated to recycle. Secondary data were collected from: the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection’s (DEP) County Recycling Program, which includes both county and municipal data; DEP Bureau of Waste Management’s County Waste Destinations In Tons of Waste quarterly reports for the years 2010-2019; and the U.S. Census Bureau’s (2018) American Community Survey (ACS) for the years 2014-2018.

The research also compiled in-depth case studies detailing the development and implementation of successful waste management and recycling programs in rural Pennsylvania counties.

Overall, the research found recycling programs to be very diverse across the state, with significant differences identified between rural and urban Pennsylvania communities. In addition, both the survey data and secondary data indicated significant variations in programs within a DEP region, within counties, and from municipality to municipality. The research found that recycling collections are not standardized, with some excluding glass, and others refusing mixed paper, and that collection methods are also very diverse, ranging from source separation to single-stream.

The research found that local recycling programs are impacted by global markets and constraints, and that the contamination of recyclable materials has decreased the value of materials collected.

In short, while recycling provides environmental and economic benefits to Pennsylvania, the research indicated that declining recycling program revenues and rising recycling program costs are impacting the

sustainability of recycling programs statewide.

As recycling programs continue to rely on state funding, it is essential to make recycling a state priority and replenish the DEP-managed Recycling Fund, established by Act 101, to sustain operations. Further, survey respondents noted that financial resources are needed to invest in educational campaigns and websites promoting recycling services, particularly in non-mandated rural communities.

The research report, *An Examination of Recycling Programs in Rural Pennsylvania, 2010-2019*, is available at www.rural.pa.gov.

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