



Launching America's Recycling Moon Shot



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LAUNCHING AMERICA'S RECYCLING MOON SHOT

Images of marine debris are everywhere from nightly news to social media feeds, contributing to an inescapable awareness of the problems of plastic and packaging material ending up where it shouldn't. As the visuals of garbage swirling in the ocean clearly convey, this is not a looming threat — it's here and it's time to act.



The CPG industry has made unprecedented commitments to producing recyclable, compostable packaging and using recycled content. But it's far from enough. The only way it will ever be enough is if we look holistically at recycling in America and work collaboratively to replace a broken system with one that can accommodate the innovation already underway.

Every stakeholder must be at the table. The CPG industry, manufacturers of packaging material, waste haulers and recycling processors, environmental organizations and, perhaps most critical in the eyes of the American public, the government.

Consumer Brands' latest research reveals that Americans want the government to lead on a solution to the plastic and packaging waste crisis. They feel it is worthy of a "moon shot," mirroring the collaborative

effort the government orchestrated for the Apollo space project and other efforts of societal importance, like creating a national highway system or mapping the human genome.

But right now, most Americans feel the government is not doing nearly enough and recycling is crumbling. Recycling in the United States began piecemeal — city-by-city, county-by-county. It should not end that way. Across the country, local systems are quietly reducing the items they will accept and eliminating curbside collection.

Without substantial change, recycling in America, consisting of more than 9,800 individual systems, will continue to slowly erode. The challenges of fixing recycling are substantial; the consequences of allowing it to fail will be felt for generations. But will every stakeholder show up to meet the challenge?

This is a Crisis

The pressure to take action — the desperation to do something — is near universal. Eighty-eight percent of respondents said they were concerned about the environment. A near-equal 87 percent of Americans expressed concern about single-use plastic and packaging waste, and 86 percent agree that the world is facing a plastic and packaging crisis.

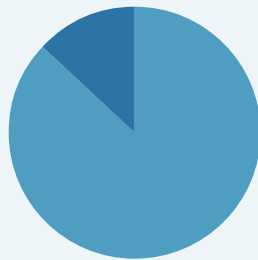
THE CRITICAL ROLE OF GOVERNMENT IN CALLING FOR A MOON SHOT

The cracks are showing in America's fragmented recycling system. Consisting of nearly 10,000 unique programs, each with their own rules, the potential for confusion is obvious. Confusion is coupled with eroding confidence, as more and more of these systems reduce what materials they will accept, landfill recyclable material for economic reasons or cut programs entirely.

The time for big changes to the recycling system is now. Like the Apollo program in the 1960s, Americans are overwhelmingly eager for the federal government to engage in a plastics and packaging moon shot to help solve the current waste problem. Nearly eight-in-ten (77%) said they believe the federal government needs to take a leadership role to tackle packaging waste the same way it did for the Apollo project, creating a national highway system and mapping the human genome.

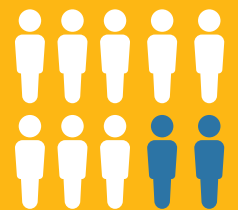
87%

of Americans expressed concern about single-use plastic and packaging waste



Their thinking is not in a vacuum, even when compared against major issues the country is facing. In fact, plastic and packaging waste is on par or more important than a host of other key societal issues. It is equal to or more critical than: reversing climate change (52%); fixing crumbling infrastructure (45%); ensuring access to health care (40%); reducing the deficit (38%); and lowering taxes (36%).

Nearly eight-in-ten (77%) said they believe the federal government needs to take a leadership role to tackle packaging waste



Government Leadership is Needed

Most Americans (77%) view recycling a public service, not a business. Their belief in recycling as a public service indicates they would be unlikely to respond favorably to arguments about the cost of recycling as a reason to default to landfills. Waste management companies, however, are challenged by low or negative rates of return, as recycling that could once be sold for a profit now carries a cost. But the cost of an environmental crisis is far higher.

Eighty-three percent believe that tackling plastic and packaging waste is an opportunity for the federal government to lead. Despite their clear feelings that the federal government must take the helm, at present, the vast majority (73%) of Americans do not feel it is doing enough.

Of those respondents, nearly a quarter (23%) are particularly critical, offering that they don't feel the government is doing anything.

There are currently proposals at the state and federal levels to combat the marine debris crisis. At the federal level, U.S. Senators Dan Sullivan (R-AK), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ) introduced the Save Our Seas Act 2.0, aimed at increasing research on marine debris and improving the United States' current waste management system and recycling infrastructure. The Consumer Brands Association issued its strong support for the bill in September, calling it an important first step in addressing the broken system and its confounding policies before meaningful change can occur.

Americans feel that the federal government is best positioned to lead among the many stakeholders that must be at the table for a solution — which includes the consumer packaged goods (CPG) industry, packaging material manufacturers, waste haulers, recycling processors and local and state governments.

CPG companies are making strides to eliminate single-use packaging and increase packaging sustainability. Consumer Brands' analysis of the 25-largest CPG companies found that every one of them has made commitments to increasing recyclability, minimizing packaging or reusing material and 80 percent of those companies are working toward 100 percent recyclable packaging for all its products by 2030.

73%

of Americans do not feel the government is doing enough to tackle plastic and packaging waste.



Moving toward fully recyclable packaging can undoubtedly have a positive impact on the environment — if it is actually recycled.

Limited Awareness of Recycling Challenges

Recyclable packaging needs to ultimately be recycled and rates in the United States are unacceptably low. The EPA found that only 34 percent of recyclable material is actually recycled. For plastic, the rate is even lower, at 9 percent.



Only 34%

of Americans know recycling is handled at the city/county level

For the recycling system to work, every American needs to be an active participant. Even though a massive 96 percent of respondents with access to curbside recycling reported that they participate, the likelihood of those households recycling correctly is low because of a patchwork of rules and regulations that make the system incredibly difficult to understand.

Most people have no idea that recycling is different across thousands of cities and counties. Just under one-third (32%) were correct that rules vary by city or county; the rest of the respondents assumed recycling rules were set at the state (31%), national (20%) or Congressional district level (3%).

Accordingly, the majority (54%) of Americans assumed there were fewer than 100 different recycling systems. In reality, there are more than 9,800.



PERSISTENT CONFUSION OVER HOW TO RECYCLE

Americans are overwhelmingly confused about the recycling system — what's recyclable, what's not, what the rules are and who makes them. CBA's prior research found that **only four percent of Americans said they did not find recycling confusing.**

Confusion about what can be recycled has led some to believe that once an item is tossed into a bin, the right items will be separated from the wrong by the recycling processor. Unfortunately, that belief is too good to be true. While some non-recyclable materials are pulled, contamination from food residue, stray plastic from caps or straws, plastic bags or glass shards, or frequently non-recyclable items like Styrofoam — something that 56 percent of Americans incorrectly believe is recyclable — proved to be too much for one of the United States' biggest markets for recyclables.

High rates of contamination led China to implement its National Sword policy in 2018, reducing allowable contamination to just .5 percent — a near impossibility. As the former largest buyer of U.S. recyclables, China's decision upended the market, which is still struggling to recover.



Only 4%

**of Americans said
recycling was not
confusing**

Eroding Confidence in Recycling's Future

For many local recycling programs, there have been no easy answers. Once profitable operations have lingered in the red, and many programs have opted to reduce acceptable items, landfill recyclables or end curbside efforts entirely.

One-quarter (25%) of consumers reported seeing a change in their curbside recycling program, including limiting the types of materials that are accepted, eliminating their area's program or seeing recyclables going straight into the garbage truck.

Of those who have experienced negative changes in curbside programs, confidence in the system is eroding. Sixty-three percent said they would stop recycling entirely if they discovered their recycling was being landfilled instead of recycled — more than double the 30 percent overall.

Despite being let down by their recycling programs, those who are experiencing negative changes to their recycling program are far from jaded.

In fact, they have some of the most acute environmental concern. More than eight-in-ten (81%) report being "very" concerned about the environment, compared to 54 percent overall who said the same. Nearly eight-in-ten (77%) also report being "very" concerned about single-use plastic and other packaging waste, compared to 52 percent overall.

Their high levels of concern about the environment and packaging waste translates to a strong belief in the need for bold solutions. Most Americans (77%) agree that the federal government should make tackling this crisis its next moon shot. But it is the intensity of this audience that is notable. Seventy-one percent of Americans who have experienced negative changes to their recycling programs said they "strongly" felt the federal government should make tackling this crisis as its next moon shot. While the vast majority agrees, those who have had reduced or eliminated recycling services have a strength of response that is matched by 41 percent of the overall audience.

Their negative experiences with recycling have made them the most adamant about the need for solutions. Ninety-six percent of people who have experienced negative changes with their recycling program said that a national standard is necessary to fix America's recycling system.





Doing the Right Thing with the Greatest Impact

Strong concern about the environment informs the 76 percent of Americans who said they generally want to do what's best for the environment, even if it requires making changes in their life.

Americans have been familiarized with recycling over decades. The high rates of participation confirm it is a behavior they are accustomed to — and the environmental action they are most likely to take. Eighty-three percent of Americans reported that they are very or completely likely to participate in curbside recycling and 78 percent are willing to separate recyclables by type.

From there, the likelihood of other environmental behaviors drops. They are far less likely to drive recyclables to a drop-off center (65%); set up a compost pile (51%); or give up their car and take public transportation (42%).

As the CPG industry continues to innovate alternatives to single-use packages, there are signs that there is an interested consumer market. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of Americans said they were very likely to buy daily goods offered in refillable packages. These products are increasingly available through programs like TerraCycle's Loop initiative, which partners with a host of CPG companies to deliver products like the milkman of the 1950s, where empty packages are returned, refilled and sent back to the consumer.

The Uniform Standards Imperative

Americans' desire to recycle proves the imperative to fix the system in the U.S. A critical step toward that important goal is solving the root issue of confusion over how and what to recycle.

93% of Americans feel that uniform, national standards will alleviate the confusion that comes with the morass of rules driven by more than 9,800 unique systems

Getting national standard for what is recyclable will be challenging and require a broad coalition of stakeholders invested in success. That fact is not lost on most Americans. Seventy-two percent of Americans said they think it will be difficult to accomplish. But the difficulty is not a reason to give up.

THE UNIFORM STANDARDS IMPERATIVE

Creating uniform standards for what is recyclable opens the flood gates of potential. Confusion contributes to contamination, but uniform standards would clear up much of that. Ninety-five percent of Americans agree that packaging with a clear label, that states if the item is recyclable and how to recycle it, would be helpful when trying to figure out whether to dispose of something in the blue bin or the garbage can.

Today's municipality-by-municipality or county-by-county approach makes it impossible to label for recyclability. What makes a recycling label work in Alexandria, VA may not apply in neighboring Fairfax County, VA, for example.

A single set of rules for recycling systems across the country, however, would make it possible for the CPG industry to not just label products for recyclability, but also make consumer education campaigns and other broad-based efforts feasible.

Empowering Americans with correct information would have a positive impact on the system. A nearly unanimous 95 percent of respondents said they would change how they recycle — rinsing jars, misplacing unrecyclable items — if they found out they were doing something incorrectly. That many Americans changing behavior in aggregate can have a significant impact in how much the U.S. is able to successfully recycle.

Launching America's Recycling Moon Shot includes data from a survey of 2,056 U.S. adults (18+), fielded October 2 – 15, 2019, powered by Toluna Analytics.



Conclusion

The vast majority (80%) of Americans feel that future generations will not be forgiving if a solution is not found now.

Without action, a tragic status quo will persist, as fully-recyclable materials end up in landfills, on the side of the road or in our oceans, harming marine life.

The Consumer Brands Association supports national recycling standards that clarify what is recyclable material. What sounds logical will be challenging. But it is a challenge we must meet. It is our responsibility to future generations. It is our moon shot.

The CPG industry is taking action and prepared to do more — inspired to do more — as it joins with stakeholders, under the leadership of the federal government, to create an enduring plan for America's recycling system and a cleaner planet for the future.
