

Oct 30, 2025

Closing the “Say-Do Gap:” How Collaboration and Investment Can Strengthen the Nation’s Recycling System

By Tara Hemmer, Chief Sustainability Officer, WM

Now in its second year, the annual WM Recycling Report gives us a deeper look at how Americans feel about recycling – and what actually happens in practice. The recently released [2025 edition](#) finds that while many respondents say they recycle and feel good about it, the reality is that only about a third of our materials (according to the most recent data available from the [U.S. EPA](#)) actually make it into the recycling stream.

Leveraging a national survey of more than 1,000 consumers and immersive behavioral research in various U.S. markets, WM dug into this “say-do gap” – meaning there is a disconnect between what Americans say they do and their actions – to learn more about how stakeholders can come together to reduce barriers to recycling and build a stronger, more effective recycling system. The findings highlight opportunities to simplify and enhance recycling efforts. They also reveal that consumers frequently favor brands committed to recycling, whether through the use of recycled materials in their products or by providing access to recycling.

Consumer packaged goods companies play a crucial role in building a stronger recycling system

Our research shows that many Americans are paying attention to companies’ recycling actions. **63% of respondents say they’re more likely to buy from companies that use recycled content, and 77% notice when businesses make recycling available.** When companies prioritize recycling and use recycled materials, it’s

not just good for the environment, it can also be good for business. We found that many consumers reward companies that make sustainability a priority, and many are motivated to recycle when they know their efforts matter.

Consumer packaged goods companies are also a critical piece of the recycling system. By using recycled content in their products, they can help build robust domestic end markets – creating demand for recycled materials and making it possible for the things consumers put in their recycling bins to get a second life as new products and packaging.

Barriers behind the consumer “say-do gap”

Encouragingly, our research also shows that many consumers want to recycle and feel good about doing so. We found that, among respondents who do recycle, nearly half (48%) stated they started recycling because they wanted to make a difference. We also found that most respondents (88%) stated they believe recycling is important in protecting the future of our environment.

However, we know there are barriers to recycling that can make it hard to do. Of those who do not recycle, 35% note they don't have access to recycling services in their area, while another quarter (23%) are interested in recycling, but find it too hard or inconvenient to do. We also found that 24% of respondents find recycling difficult due to challenges like driving to recycling locations (44%), limited curbside pickup (30%), and confusion about recyclable items (29%).

On a broader level, our behavioral research reveals that daily life's overwhelming nature can impact recycling behaviors. Many participants feel there is less time for recycling amidst busy schedules and other attention-grabbing events, meaning that even with good intentions, recycling can fall by the wayside when time and mindshare are limited.

Collaboration is the key to making progress

The 2025 WM Recycling Report makes it clear: closing the “say-do gap” between people's intentions and actions requires collaboration across companies, municipalities, recycling providers and communities to make recycling easy, convenient and rewarding.

For example, simplifying recycling education through labels on packaging can make recycling more accessible, and increasing recycling availability in communities and at shops and businesses can enhance participation. Showcasing how recycled materials can be repurposed into new products can motivate individuals, providing frequently updated recycling guidelines can make recycling easier, and emphasizing recycling as a collective effort can encourage communities to keep their environments clean.

At WM, we're committed to doing our part to help close the gap. For example, we are on track to invest more than \$1.4 billion in modernizing our recycling infrastructure from 2022 through 2026. We also frequently open our recycling facility doors to communities to show them what the recycling process looks like, and our Sustainability Advisory Services team helps businesses build effective recycling and waste diversion programs.

Recycling is a shared responsibility – and when we lead together, we can build stronger communities and a more sustainable future. Read the full [2025 WM Recycling Report](https://mediaroom.wm.com/Closing-the-Say-Do-Gap-How-Collaboration-and-Investment-Can-Strengthen-the-Nations-Recycling-System) to learn more.

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