ASTSWMO, Providing Pathways to Our Nation's Environmental Stewardship Since 1974

ASTSWMO 2026 RECYCLING POSITION PAPER

INTRODUCTION

It is predicted that global municipal solid waste generation will grow from 2.1 billion metric tons in 2023 to 3.8 billion metric tons by 2050[i]. While the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) provides for the development of a regulatory framework for the safe disposal of solid waste, the provisions, and the title, of RCRA also place a strong emphasis on resource conservation, recovery, and recycling of solid wastes. Disposal should not be treated as an inevitability for materials that have alternative environmental and economically sound options. The Association of State and Territorial Solid Waste Management Officials (ASTSWMO) supports the existing U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) waste management hierarchy[ii], which upholds recycling as an integral part of the larger waste management framework. Understanding that United States materials management strategies are fragmented and rely on local governments to fund and enforce, without continued and consistent advocacy for sustainable measures, valuable resources are lost, and adverse impacts to society, the environment, and the global economy compound.

ASTSWMO's 2020 Recycling Position Paper[iii] outlined key recycling challenges and recommended major system changes for EPA to consider while developing the National Recycling Strategy[iv] (The Strategy), released in November 2023. Among the major needs that ASTSWMO identified were improvements to the existing recycling infrastructure to domestically manage recyclable materials in the U.S., along with additional infrastructure to meet quality standards for domestic manufacturing; additional, consistent, and ongoing public education and outreach about recycling; and enhanced measurement and data.

The EPA's Solid Waste Infrastructure and Recycling (SWIFR) and Consumer Recycling and Education Outreach (REO) grant programs address these needs by supporting activities to improve the infrastructure for recycling, data collection, implementation of State-led plans to advance post-consumer materials management, and recycling education and outreach. Accordingly, ASTSWMO supports continued financing to States and Territories through these programs to facilitate further domestic infrastructure growth in these important sectors.

BACKGROUND

In 2020, Congress passed the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act (Public Law No. 116-224)[v], which authorized recycling infrastructure funding later implemented through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA, Public Law No. 117-58)[vi]. This historic investment engaged States, Territories, political jurisdictions, Tribes, and other stakeholders with grants to implement The Strategy through waste management and recycling programs. The Strategy is aligned with and supports implementation of the National Recycling Goal[vii] to increase the recycling rate to 50 percent by 2030. The Strategy is organized by five strategic objectives to create a more resilient and cost-effective national recycling system:

- Improve Markets for Recycling Commodities.
- Increase Collection and Improve Materials Management Infrastructure.
- Reduce Contamination in the Recycled Materials Stream.
- Enhance Policies to Support Recycling.
- Standardize Measurement and Increase Data Collection.

In response to these identified objectives, the IIJA provides funding to strengthen waste management infrastructure and recycling programs through the SWIFR[viii] and REO[ix] grants. Through this support, these EPA grant programs now deliver historic investments to improve and expand local recycling and post-consumer materials management infrastructure and educate the public for effective recycling and composting programs.

As a further illustration of the investment needs for recycling, EPA's U.S. Recycling System Assessment[x] estimated that by 2024 "an investment of $36.5 to $43.4 billion is necessary to improve curbside collection, drop-off, and processing infrastructure, including material recovery facilities, packaging material recycling facilities, composting, anaerobic digestion, and livestock infrastructure" and that "key investments must be made in all aspects of the national recycling system"[xi].

SWIFR & REO FUNDING

Building on the priorities outlined in The Strategy and the investment authorized through the IIJA, all 56 eligible States, Territories, and the District of Columbia requested funding through the first round, non-competitive SWIFR State and Territorial (State) grants. This provided the opportunity for States to develop plans that consider and align with the National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste and Recycling Organics[xii], the National Strategy to Prevent Plastic Pollution[xiii], the Sustainable Management of Electronics and Batteries[xiv], and the Circular Economy[xv]. With this funding, States were enabled to develop either their first or a revised solid waste management plan and evaluate waste disposed of in the State. In addition to planning, the other two areas for which States can use SWIFR grants are data and measurement activities, and State-led implementation of plans. Recycling aids in conservation of landfill capacity by diverting materials that would otherwise be landfilled from the waste stream and returns them to the chain of commerce. Activities undertaken through SWIFR and REO grants contribute to increases in recycling and diverting waste from overburdened landfills.

The State SWIFR funding was not specific to physical infrastructure, whereas the Political Subdivision SWIFR funding was directed towards improving or adding critical recycling infrastructure for the management of materials. As of December 2025, EPA has provided two rounds of funding under the SWIFR Political Subdivisions Grant Program. For the first round of funding for Political Subdivisions, EPA received 311 applications for infrastructure and awarded 25 grants, representing only 8% of the total requests; and in the second round EPA received 307 applications and awarded 17 grants, representing only 5% of the total requests. The overwhelming response to the funding opportunity reflects the need for infrastructure support at the State and local levels.

REO round one funding was awarded to stakeholders, including non-profits, to develop education and outreach campaigns across the country to communicate the value and importance of recycling to recover materials and critical minerals.

The following uses of SWIFR[xvi] and REO grants[xvii] highlight how these grant programs are supporting and advancing The Strategy's five objectives:

- *Improve markets for recycling commodities*

Commodity markets globally fluctuate. For the U.S., to develop the potential for a sustained commodity market for recyclables, there must be demand for post-consumer content and responsible end markets. The approach to enhancing these markets varies State-to-State based on the unique characteristics of the individual jurisdiction. As one strategy, individual States are adopting extended producer responsibility laws addressing the management of certain materials that will aid in the improvement of markets for those materials. State SWIFR funds invested in the development of Statewide market development plans, with strategies for maximizing collected funds and improving markets for scrap tires, recovery of emerging materials (e.g., solar panels and wind turbines), and addressing challenges in data collection, metrics, and tracking. The intention of these investments is to provide recommendations from Statewide market development plans that will support priorities and strategies in solid waste management plans.

- *Increase Collection and Improve Materials Management Infrastructure*

In the most recent round of REO funding, EPA provided funding to a wide variety of strategies focused on developing new education and outreach campaigns to communicate the value and importance of recycling to recover materials and critical minerals. Round one funding included activities such as expanding the reach of multilingual outreach, train-the-trainer programming, social marketing facilitation, community recycling collection events for hard-to-recycle items, electronic waste, and household hazardous waste and others. The results of these initiatives should provide information for nationwide increased collection that can be implemented in the next iteration of investment.

- *Reduce Contamination in the Recycled Materials Stream*

SWIFR grants have enabled States to evaluate educational tools, such as search engines that assist residents in determining how they can recycle items, including where to donate materials and reduce potential contamination in recycling streams. These grants are aimed at increasing participation and generating higher volume and quality of materials being recycled.

- *Enhance Policies to Support Recycling*

State SWIFR grants have supported the development of literature and other information on recycling and waste reduction, such as the benefits of waste reduction, the health impacts of single-use plastics, and best practices for residents on recycling and waste management. Grants have also been used to establish new Solid Waste and Materials Management plans that will serve as a long-term framework for circular economy and materials management planning. In the Tribal and intertribal consortia SWIFR grants, investments were provided to reduce contamination in the recycled materials stream, enhance policies and programs that support circularity, increase collection, and improve materials management infrastructure.

- *Standardize Measurement and Increase Data Collection*

State SWIFR grants have supported the development of standardized measurements and reporting and provided guidance and technical assistance. The activities include training, market development, outreach for the implementation of solid waste management plans, and updating prior management processes and systems related to data collection. For many States, SWIFR grants have provided the opportunity to execute a waste characterization study to analyze the composition of disposed waste; this data collection is often used to inform State recycling policy and plan development. In the Tribal and intertribal consortia SWIFR grants, investments were provided to create waste stream data sheets for data collection.

POSITION

ASTSWMO recommends EPA takes any necessary steps to continue providing investments for infrastructure and education through sustained EPA SWIFR and REO grant funding. Investments are critical to move at the pace needed to effect change and implement the National Recycling Strategy's strategic objectives. The fact that under one-tenth of applications for physical infrastructure were funded underscores that demand far exceeds available resources.

Funding of these grants has been instrumental in advancing recycling infrastructure and market development, and continued investment is critical to sustain this progress and build a more resilient national materials management system. A stable, consistently available funding stream would reduce external pressures and enable the predictability needed for States to plan, strategize regionally, and develop the large-scale operations required to support a resilient national system. ASTSWMO is committed to working with the EPA and other stakeholders to develop and implement solutions that can improve the U.S. recycling system to achieve increased environmental and economic benefits.

Approved by the ASTSWMO Board of Directors on March 11, 2026.

---

[i] https://www.basel.int/Implementation/Plasticwaste/PlasticWasteAmendments/Overview/tabid/8426/Default.aspx

[ii] https://www.epa.gov/smm/sustainable-materials-management-non-hazardous-materials-and-waste-management-hierarchy

[iii] https://astswmo.org/astswmo-recycling-position-paper/

[iv] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-recycling-strategy

[v] https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/1982

[vi] https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/3684

[vii] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/us-national-recycling-goal

[viii] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/solid-waste-infrastructure-recycling-grant-program

[ix] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/consumer-recycling-education-and-outreach-grant-program

[x] https://www.epa.gov/system/files/documents/2024-12/financial_assessment_of_us_recycling_system_infrastructure.pdf

[xi] https://www.epa.gov/smm/us-recycling-infrastructure-assessment-and-state-data-collection-reports

[xii] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-strategy-reducing-food-loss-and-waste-and-recycling-organics

[xiii] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/national-strategy-prevent-plastic-pollution

[xiv] https://www.epa.gov/electronics-batteries-management

[xv] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/what-circular-economy

[xvi] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/recycling-grant-selectees-and-recipients

[xvii] https://www.epa.gov/circulareconomy/consumer-recycling-education-and-outreach-grant-program