**Fiscal Facts: Wisconsin Recycling Changes**

As consumers turn more heavily to online purchases, cardboard recycling has more than doubled in Wisconsin since 2013, while other paper recycling has dropped by 36%.

During the same period, the total amount of recyclable material collected in the state has declined slightly. For every Wisconsinite, local governments collected an average of 136 pounds of recyclable materials in 2022, the lowest per capita amount in at least a decade. When totaled up, that amounted to about 2% fewer tons of recyclables in 2022 than in 2013.

In addition, recycling services – which in Wisconsin are provided by a combination of municipal, county, and private entities -- increasingly are stressing local government budgets. Operational costs for municipal recycling have grown slowly – 0.6% per year between 2013 and 2021 when adjusted for inflation. At the same time, state recycling aids have declined and now only cover approximately 16% of the cost of these services.

The slight drop in recycling tonnage, combined with volatile prices for recycled materials, have also caused a drop in revenue from the sale of recycled materials, further reducing outside resources used to cover these costs. These factors, plus strict state limits on local government revenue, have pinched local budgets.

Together, cardboard and paper make up the largest share of materials collected each year since 2013, accounting for approximately 60% of the statewide total. However, the split between the two has seen big changes. The largest increase in corrugated cardboard recycling came between 2019 and 2021, likely due to increased online shopping and shipping during COVID lockdowns.

Aluminum containers – notably, the most valuable recyclable material -- saw the biggest drop on a percentage basis, falling by 16.4% or 1,800 tons. Glass containers, the third most recycled material by weight, saw an increase of 10.8% or 9,900 tons over the nine-year period, while plastic climbed 11.5%, or 3,400 tons.

Younger Americans tend to consume less alcohol overall and less beer specifically, which could help explain some of the drop in aluminum recycling. However, there are other potential explanations for the falling volume of recycled materials, including the rising perception that recyclables all end up in a landfill and growing confusion about what can and cannot be recycled. A practice known as “lightweighting” -- in which some types of packaging have become thinner and lighter -- may also help explain some of the drop in recycled materials.

Recycling has substantial environmental benefits, chief among them preserving landfill space. Using recycled materials also reduces energy needed to produce aluminum containers and limits air pollution generated when making paper products.

Ultimately, state recycling grants have not kept up with growing costs, leaving local residents paying more for these services through increased property taxes or fees for service. If state leaders want to ensure continued high-quality recycling services and limit the growth of local taxes and fees, they may wish to consider increasing state recycling aids to once again cover a greater share of the costs.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*