

Why GAO Did This Study

In 1976, Congress sought to reduce solid waste and encourage recycling as part of RCRA, which gave primary responsibility for recycling to states and municipalities but requires EPA and Commerce to take specific actions. The United States generated almost 1,800 pounds of waste per capita in 2018. Recycling rates for common recyclables, such as paper, plastics, glass, and some metals, remain low. Furthermore, recent international import restrictions have reduced demand for U.S. exports of recyclables. GAO was asked to review federal efforts that advance recycling in the United States.

This report examines (1) cross-cutting challenges affecting recycling in the United States, (2) actions that selected federal agencies have taken that advance recycling, and (3) actions EPA has taken to plan and coordinate national efforts to advance recycling. GAO reviewed laws and agency documents; and interviewed federal officials and nonfederal stakeholders, such as states, municipalities, and industry representatives, selected for their expertise and efforts to advance recycling.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making one matter for congressional consideration to clarify a RCRA requirement for Commerce or to assign responsibility for stimulating domestic markets to another agency; and three recommendations to EPA, including that it take actions to fulfill certain RCRA requirements. EPA concurred with GAO's recommendations.

View [GAO-21-87](#). For more information, contact J. Alfredo Gómez at (202) 512-3841 or gomezj@gao.gov.

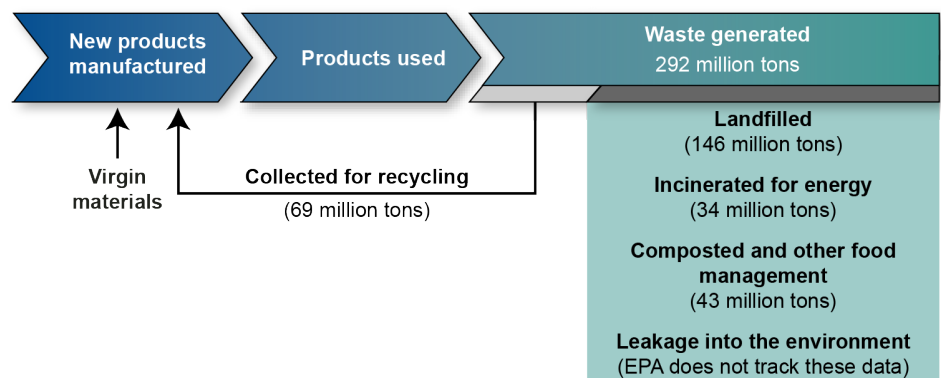
RECYCLING

Building on Existing Federal Efforts Could Help Address Cross-Cutting Challenges

What GAO Found

Based on GAO analysis of stakeholder views, five cross-cutting challenges affect the U.S. recycling system: (1) contamination of recyclables; (2) low collection of recyclables; (3) limited market demand for recyclables; (4) low profitability for operating recycling programs; and (5) limited information to support decision-making about recycling. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) most recent data show that less than a quarter of the waste generated in the United States is collected for recycling (69 million of 292 million tons) and is potentially available, along with new materials, to make new products (see fig.).

Estimated Generation and Disposition of Waste in the United States, as of 2018



Source: GAO analysis of most recent Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data. | GAO-21-87

EPA, the Departments of Commerce (Commerce) and Energy, and the Federal Trade Commission have taken actions that advance recycling, such as collecting data and awarding grants for research on recycling technologies. However, EPA has not conducted studies or developed recommendations for administrative or legislative action on the effect of existing public policies on recycling, as the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) requires. Conducting these studies would provide Congress with information to better evaluate the effect of different policies on U.S. recycling efforts. In addition, Commerce is not fully meeting its RCRA requirement to stimulate the development of markets for recycled materials because it has not taken actions to stimulate domestic markets, as GAO recommended in 2006. Commerce officials stated that their work to stimulate international markets fulfills Commerce's obligations under RCRA. Congress may need to act to clarify Commerce's responsibilities under RCRA or assign responsibility for stimulating domestic markets to another agency. By taking action, Congress can ensure a federal response to the reduction in international demand for U.S. recyclables.

EPA has taken several actions to plan and coordinate national efforts to advance recycling, such as releasing a draft national recycling strategy in October 2020. However, EPA has not incorporated some desirable characteristics for effective national strategies, identified in prior GAO work. By better incorporating such characteristics as it finalizes and implements its draft strategy, EPA will have greater assurance of the strategy's usefulness in making resource and policy decisions and will better ensure accountability for its implementation.