

Guest commentary: Producer responsibility can turn waste into a resource

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | 16h ago

Torre
Guest commentary



Aspen stepped up its community carbon reduction goals last year to include new science-based targets that call for drastic reductions in the waste sector. These goals include reducing organic material going to the landfill by 25% by 2030, and 100% by 2050, and 70% diversion of all waste from the landfill by 2050. Greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions linked to the transportation and decomposition of waste are the third-largest source of emissions in Aspen. As we approach the sooner-than-expected expiration date of our landfill (currently 8-10 years away), more needs to be done to reduce unnecessary packaging, strengthen domestic supply chains and promote recycling.

The Producer Responsibility Program for Recycling (HB22-1355), introduced to Colorado state lawmakers this week, can get Colorado on a path toward eliminating much of its waste by keeping manufacturers accountable and creating incentives for recycling. Currently, the costs of recycling programs are paid for by residents and local governments. Producer responsibility would shift responsibility for recycling from consumers to corporations who send packaging material into Colorado. Corporations would become responsible for the management of packaging from the start to the end of the products lifecycle – accounting for the true cost of recycling a product.

As a first step, this would include paying into a nonprofit based on both the amount and type of packaging the producer uses. The nonprofit would use money collected by their members to pay private companies and local governments to operate their recycling programs, covering 100% of the cost of these programs. One anticipated outcome of this bill would be more packaging arriving in the form of easily recycled aluminum instead of plastic or Styrofoam. Producer responsibility creates a direct economic incentive for companies to minimize their packaging and promote sustainability.

Colorado has a recycling problem. At the state level, Colorado's recycling rate is between 11% to 15%. Aspen's recycling rate (32%), is higher than the state's rate, but is significantly below recycling rates seen in countries with producer responsibility laws (60 to 80%). The reasons for low recycling rates range from consumer error to the types of certain packaging that producers create not being recyclable with current technology.

The city of Aspen waste team already runs numerous programs to help reduce the amount of waste reaching the landfill and associated emissions, including: enforcing our recycling ordinance, providing scrap metal, glass, textile and yard waste recycling at no cost, in addition to providing education to help residents and businesses divert waste property. Aspen City Council is expected to hear an ordinance later this year on a city-run program which would prohibit food in landfill trash.

Aspen supports producer responsibility legislation because local efforts can only take us part of the way to secure our waste goals. In the past, Aspen offered strong support for HB21-1162, which recently passed at the Colorado state level. HB21-1162, which takes effect in 2024, creates a standard where stores can no longer give out single-use plastic bags or foam containers used for food products. City staff also participate in the Western Slope Council, a council of the members of Recycle Colorado located on the Western Slope to drive regional recycling solutions.

A coordinated approach to recycling at the state level will only further help our cause. Currently, there are 40 countries that have producer responsibility policies for packaging materials, and just last year Maine and Oregon became the first U.S. states to enact this type of legislation. The reallocation of costs from the beginning of the products life to the end puts more onus on companies to take responsibility and eases the burden imposed on citizens and local governments to recycle (often as an afterthought). This concept isn't just supported by local governments and consumers, over 100 companies have publicly stated their support for producer responsibility policies.

Given that our community's landfill is expected to fill up within a decade, we need to push towards less packaging and repurposing every item we can. HB22-1355 would expand access to recycling across the state by offering services to communities in rural regions of Colorado that don't currently have the means to recycle their used commodities.

In the current climate emergency, even the smallest actions matter both for our climate and natural environment. Producer responsibility is exactly what's needed to shift toward a culture where we value closed loop and regenerative waste practices. Aspen must reach our community's bold carbon reduction goals to secure a sustainable future, and we will continue to support and drive sustainable action to get there.

Torre is in his second term as the mayor of Aspen.

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