

# Policy Statement on Waste Reduction, Reuse and Recycling: A Jobs, Energy Savings and Global Warming Solution

In response to the environmental and economic crises, the BlueGreen Alliance (BGA) and its labor and environmental partner organizations strongly support a comprehensive national strategy to address waste reduction, reuse and recycling (including composting). Such a strategy will save energy, reduce global warming emissions, divert solid waste from our landfills and incinerators, and create and retain family-supporting jobs.

Launched in 2006 by the United Steelworkers and the Sierra Club, BGA is a unique labor-environmental collaboration that has grown to include the Communications Workers of America, Natural Resources Defense Council, Service Employees International Union, National Wildlife Federation, Laborers' International Union of North America, Union of Concerned Scientists, Utility Workers Union of America, American Federation of Teachers, Amalgamated Transit Union, Sheet Metal Workers' International Association, United Auto Workers and the United Food and Commercial Workers. BGA unites more than 14 million members and supporters in pursuit of good jobs, a clean environment and a green economy.

BGA and its partner organizations believe that sound recycling policy should be based on three simple ideas. First, there are costs — financial, human and environmental — for everything we buy, use and throw away. Second, investments designed to expand America's recycling infrastructure will create significant job opportunities for working men and women. Third, waste reduction and recycling will also help reduce pollution that damages human health and exacerbates global warming, help conserve natural resources and energy, and help prevent environmental degradation.

Policies and investments that expand our nationwide recycling infrastructure for the 21<sup>st</sup> century can help solve our nation's current jobs crisis. At the same time, a dramatic increase in recycling will help lay the foundation for long-term sustainable growth that benefits working people and the planet alike.

## Recycling Targets and Demand Creation

The United States should establish a national recycling rate of 75 percent by 2030.<sup>1</sup> There would be dramatic and positive employment impacts that result from increasing the national recycling rate to 75 percent. A 2011 Tellus Institute study estimates that increasing our national recycling rate for municipal solid waste (MSW) and construction and demolition (C & D) debris to that level would create over 1.1 million more jobs by 2030 compared to a business-as-usual growth rate.<sup>2</sup>

With the current national recycling rate for solid waste at approximately 33 percent,<sup>3</sup> increasing our recycling rate is a practical way to achieve environmental, energy and economic benefits.<sup>4</sup> Setting a meaningful and attainable goal has proven to be the first and most important step for successful recycling programs. Doing so could also spur innovation, attract private investment and create new markets.

To achieve this goal, recycling legislation should establish incentives to support the domestic production of goods made from recovered waste and to promote the domestic manufacture of recyclable products,<sup>5</sup> while phasing out incentives that encourage waste exports, landfilling and incineration.

BGA supports policies to help reduce waste generation and promote reuse and domestic recycling, including policies that support local recycling programs, help develop and sustain recycling and composting facilities, and implement Extended Producer Responsibility

mechanisms (see below). Among the specific executive and legislative actions supported by BGA are:

- An Executive Order by the Obama Administration that sets the goal of a 75 percent national recycling rate by 2030 and the formation of an inter-agency task force that will advise the President on strategies necessary for the nation to achieve this goal;
- The aggressive implementation of existing Executive Orders that include recycling goals such that a 75 percent recycling rate is attained by federal agencies, their contractors, vendors, and other companies in the federal government's supply chain;
- A national effort to promote and educate Americans about the importance of recycling and composting. Approximately 60 percent of homes have residential recycling collection services, but only about half of those with service participate.<sup>6</sup> The last time all of America was encouraged to recycle was during World War II;
- Federal container deposit laws requiring a minimum refundable deposit on beverage containers to ensure a high rate of recycling; and
- Federal laws that mandate e-waste (electronics) recycling, and provide for a systematic collection (e.g., curbside pickup), transportation and domestic re-manufacturing infrastructure to enable compliance, as well as information for consumers about the availability of e-waste recycling services, with complementary policies, such as ratification of the Basel Convention, that prohibit the export of hazardous waste. Greater U.S. policy support for existing international and foreign laws are needed to slow the export of these hazardous products to developing nations such as China, India, Ghana, Nigeria, and others.

## Waste Reduction

The Zero Waste Hierarchy,<sup>7</sup> which provides a list of priorities for the environmental management of materials and energy, should inform federal policy making. The first priority within this hierarchy is to reduce the use of energy, materials and toxic substances to a minimum. A tested mechanism to do so, which is used in Germany, Canada and other advanced economies, is called Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). EPR requires producers (or first importers) to take responsibility for the life cycle costs of their products, thereby providing a strong incentive to incorporate environmental considerations in the design of those products. BGA supports legislation and regulation that implements EPR for different product categories in targeted industries by means that ensure such industries are not placed at a competitive disadvantage in the global economy. Producers in a targeted industry should have an approved plan for how they will recover, at no cost to taxpayers, their products when consumers are done with them; social, environmental, and job retention standards should be met in the plan (for example, no export of hazardous materials, no use of child or prison labor); and there should be measurable results, outcomes and deadlines. EPR policies should also be complemented, where possible, by mandatory recycling policies that place responsibility on the consumers of products to return them.

An American example of this philosophy can be found in San Francisco, a city with a goal of zero waste by 2020. Adopting the stance that landfills and incineration should only be used as last resorts, the city has already achieved a 77 percent recovery rate for all materials discarded within the city by both residents and businesses, including the commercial real estate industry, using a mandatory, single-stream collection system. The city has also developed the first large scale, urban collection of food scraps for composting in the country, diverting over 400 tons per day of compostable material from landfills, creating enormous quantities of compost for use in organic agriculture. Recognizing a need to continue building on this success, the government of San Francisco has also expressed support for extended producer and consumer responsibility legislation to slow the ever-increasing tide of wasteful consumption.

## Job Creation, Retention, and Quality

The Tellus Institute study found that the more than 1.1 million additional jobs supported by a 75 percent recycling rate are in a range of industry sectors, from recycling collection and processing and reuse, to construction and transportation. The sector where the most jobs exist is manufacturing, in which 600,000 jobs are associated with manufacturing that uses recycled materials.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, these are jobs in paper and pulp mills, steel mills, plastics converters, and iron and steel foundries, where lower-value recovered materials are transformed into higher-value new products by skilled, often union, workers.

The expanded investment, supportive policy and ambitious goals for waste reduction, reuse and recycling that BGA calls for in this document would spark significant job creation in the economy as a whole, but manufacturing, which has suffered significant job losses in recent decades, would see the greatest employment impact.

In this light, increasing our national recycling rate should also be seen as a job retention strategy. The survival of various American industries is dependent on access to materials. Access to domestic recyclable materials is threatened in some sectors. National recycling policy must include incentives to retain recovered materials for re-manufacture within the U.S., subject to responsible U.S. labor and environmental protections.

***The BlueGreen Alliance, therefore, supports a national recycling policy geared toward keeping this material in the U.S. throughout its life cycle.***

BGA also supports ensuring that any executive action or legislation to realize the job creation potential of a 75 percent national recycling rate includes prevailing wage standards for jobs created in the construction sector, wage standards for jobs created in other sectors, and strong protections for the collective bargaining rights of workers.

## Recycling and Climate and Energy Legislation

Recycling reduces greenhouse gas emissions by lowering the amount of energy, chemicals and water needed to make products, and by reducing the amount of waste produced by virgin resource-based manufacturing. The Tellus study finds that achieving a 75 percent recycling rate in 2030 would reduce greenhouse gas reductions by about 276 million metric tons of carbon dioxide, equivalent to shutting down approximately 72 coal-fired power plants.<sup>9</sup> Given such potential impact, we need to expand our ability to recover and reuse materials as a central strategy in any future legislative effort to reduce global warming pollution, while avoiding incentives for landfill expansion and waste incineration.

*In particular, BGA recommends that a portion of carbon allowance value generated from any future legislation that puts a price on carbon should be invested in the kinds of recycling infrastructure-building initiatives detailed below.*

## National Recycling Infrastructure

We must provide federal funds to assist in building a strong recycling and composting infrastructure. Such funds, whether distributed by direct investment or tax incentives, can be invested in:

- materials recovery industrial parks;
- real estate acquisition, planning and zoning for the purpose of constructing or expanding material recovery facilities;
- fleet and transfer station construction and upgrading;
- The diversion of construction and demolition debris from demolition, deconstruction or renovation projects that meet quality assurance standards;
- research, development, and commercialization of new and existing composting technologies and expansion of composting infrastructure;
- the development of “smart routes” for the collection of recyclable materials and a more expansive distribution network to move and rotate recycling containers;
- the purchase of new, fuel-efficient vehicles to collect recycling across the country;
- the extension of basic recycling services to areas of the country where recycling rates are low, in particular rural areas, and to buildings with low rates, such as multi-family residential and commercial buildings;
- the construction or expansion of manufacturing facilities that utilize recyclable materials; and
- the development of new domestic markets and industries based on the re-manufacture of recyclable materials.

*Overall, the BlueGreen Alliance supports investment in an infrastructure that expands local recycling programs, develops recycling facilities, and increases the capacity of U.S. manufacturing to use recyclable materials.*

## Workplace Safety and Health

Waste collection is one of the most dangerous jobs in America — more dangerous than firefighting or police work.<sup>10</sup> To reduce worker exposures to on-the-job hazards related to recycling, BGA believes that the federal government should expand the protection and enforcement of occupational safety and health law, improve oversight and reporting of occupational injuries and illnesses in the recycling industry, provide employer and worker training on best practices in worker safety and health, and provide incentives for employers to focus on engineering solutions that eliminate hazards at the point of design.

To reach the goal of 75 percent recycling, federal policy needs to promote the production of materials that are safe and easily recyclable. Reform of the 1976 Toxics Substances Control Act should reduce the use of potentially harmful chemicals and promote the production and use of materials that are readily recyclable.

## Conclusion

The BlueGreen Alliance recognizes the enormous opportunities for our country, as well as the challenges, that accompany the implementation of a comprehensive strategy that will move America to a national recycling rate of 75 percent by 2030. And we also recognize the range of debate on particular strategies for reaching that target. But we share a common conviction that any successful strategy must be guided by two overriding principles:

- first, that we promote waste reduction, reuse and domestic recycling to help us achieve our targets for reducing global warming and other forms of health harming pollution; and
- second, that those strategies simultaneously put Americans to work in quality jobs and lay a foundation for scaling up a domestic recycling economy that is an integral part of the broader clean green economy we must build to secure a competitive, just, and sustainable future.

## Endnotes

- 1 Municipal solid waste includes household waste and commercial waste. As used in this policy statement, it also includes construction and demolition debris.
- 2 “More Jobs, Less Pollution: Growing the Recycling Economy in the U.S.,” Tellus Institute with Sound Resources Management, 2011.
- 3 “Municipal Solid Waste Generation, Recycling, and Disposal in the United States: Facts and Figures for 2008,” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, p.1. Available at <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw2008rpt.pdf>.
- 4 If we recycle 75 percent of all used beverage containers, we would recover 500,000 metric tons of aluminum — and since recycled aluminum saves 9.5 tons of CO2 per metric ton of virgin metal, we would save 4.75 million tons of CO2.
- 5 Organic waste is waste material of animal or plant origin. Among other things, this would include yard waste, wood waste, food waste and paper waste.
- 6 “Municipal Solid Waste Generation, Recycling, and Disposal in the United States Detailed Tables and Figures for 2008,” U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Table 25. Available at: <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw2008data.pdf>.
- 7 The Zero Waste Hierarchy is the environmental management of materials and energy that adheres to the following order of priority: first, *reduce* the use of materials, toxic substances and energy to a minimum; second, *repair* and *reuse*, extending the service life of materials and products; and third, *recycle*, conserving as much as possible of embodied value.
- 8 “More Jobs, Less Pollution: Growing the Recycling Economy in the U.S.,” Tellus Institute with Sound Resources Management, 2011.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 “Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries 2008,” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Available at: [http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes\\_nat.htm#b33-0000](http://www.bls.gov/oes/2008/may/oes_nat.htm#b33-0000).

## BLUEGREEN ALLIANCE PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS



## BLUEGREEN ALLIANCE

The BlueGreen Alliance is a national, strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental organizations dedicated to expanding the number and quality of jobs in the green economy.

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