



## Does recycling work?

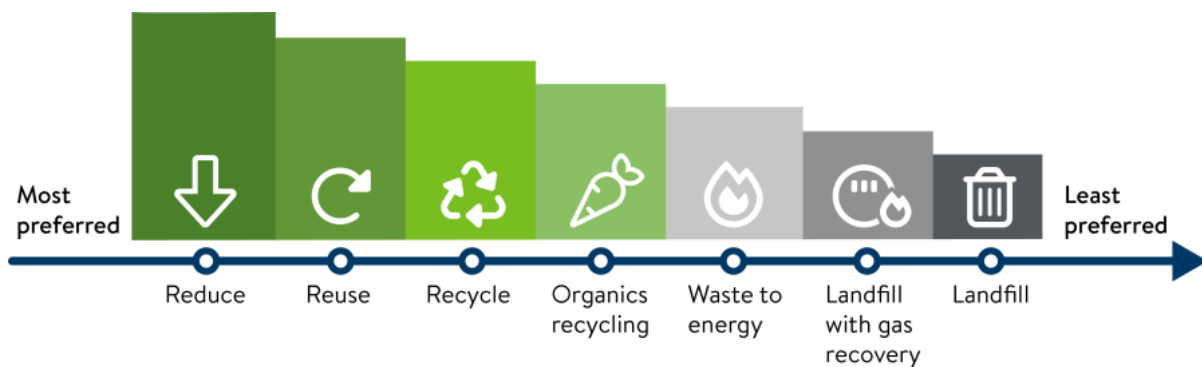
Keely Schultz, Waste Wise Sustainability Specialist

The effectiveness of our recycling system is a question that often comes up in our conversations with participants. Understandably, if a business is implementing a recycling program, they want to be sure that they are investing in a system that functions effectively to save energy, reduce carbon emissions, and process their recycled items into new materials. Since questions about the validity of recycling are so common, we wanted to address a recent Greenpeace report, entitled **“Circular Claims Fall Flat Again.”** This report, and others like it, have contributed to widespread confusion and even mistrust of our recycling system. Though this report is well-intentioned and includes valuable information, certain principles seem to be missing or misrepresented by the data that is presented.

### **Yes, and: What Greenpeace got right**

Many of us who work in recycling education would agree with Greenpeace on the importance of encouraging businesses to

prioritize reusable packaging and phase out single-use plastic products. Common single-use plastic items such as packaging, wrappers, cutlery, food containers, cups and plastic bags are intended for brief, one-time usage. Though we agree that these single-use plastics are problematic, the report fails to acknowledge the reality that they will not simply go away overnight. Recycling is currently the best management technique we have for the single-use plastics that are produced. According to the **Minnesota Pollution Control Agency's waste hierarchy**, reuse is environmentally preferable to recycling, but recycling is still preferable to landfilling or incineration.



Minnesota Pollution Control Agency waste hierarchy

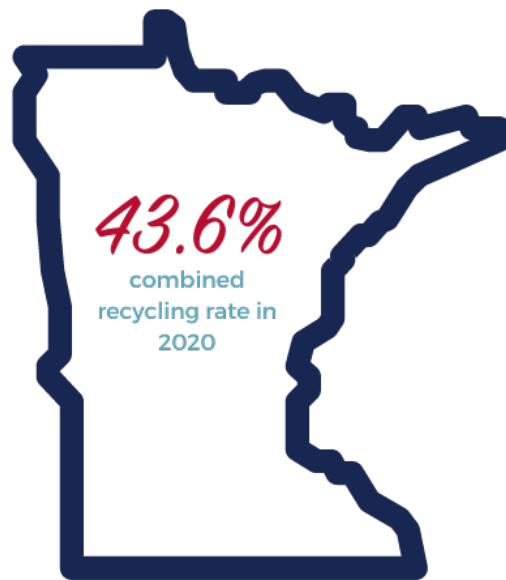
The report makes another claim that most recycling professionals would agree with: the recycling system in our country is imperfect. There are collection, contamination and market issues, and lots of work needs to be done to optimize these systems. We applaud Greenpeace's efforts to encourage transparency within the recycling system. Recycling professionals such as haulers, material recovery facility (MRF) operators, nonprofits and local government organizations should continue working to communicate openly about the issues within the industry and share what is being done to address them.

For example, a major issue with recycling is the low demand for recycled materials in the production of new items. While this is a legitimate problem for recyclers, **there are many efforts in place**

**to expand end markets for recycling** by incentivizing businesses to purchase recycled materials and use them in production. Many of the problems in the industry are fixable and major efforts are underway to remedy them. We as consumers can help by recycling (providing a supply), and buying items made from recycled materials (creating demand)!

### **Unpack(ag)ing the data**

Greenpeace's report states that "only 9% of plastic was recycled globally in 2019, and only 5–6% of plastic waste was recycled in the U.S. in 2021." A reader might interpret the statistic as such: *If I place 100 recyclable plastic bottles into a recycling bin, only 5-6 of them will be recycled into new materials.* Greenpeace actually derived this statistic using the recovery percentage, by weight, of *all* plastic produced in the United States, not just packaging and single-use plastic. The 5-6% statistic was calculated including the total weights of items like vinyl siding, healthcare equipment, lawn furniture and many other plastic items that few would mistakenly consider recyclable. This number is misleading because recycling rates are much higher when we look at products that are truly recyclable. For example, over 29% of #1 and #2 plastics produced in the U.S. are recycled by consumers. Of the 29% that are placed into recycling bins, over 99% of them are recycled into new materials! A person can be confident that once they place a plastic bottle in the recycling, it will be recycled.



In order for an item to be considered “recyclable” in Greenpeace’s study, 60% of Americans must have access to recycling facilities that process that item. This definition disqualifies many items we commonly recycle in Minnesota. It's important to understand that access to recycling facilities is not uniform nationwide. The majority of Minnesotans have access to recycling programs that accept #1, #2, and #5 plastics. In 2020, **our state's recycling rate was 43.6%**, the **seventh-best in the nation**. Recycling rates of other states range from as low as 2% in West Virginia, to the highest rate of 72% in Maine. The difference between regional recycling programs highlights the importance of regionally-specific education, media coverage and transparency about recycling.

Greenpeace also claims that it is impossible to sort the various types of plastic (#1, #2, #5, etc.) effectively to process into new materials, and that recycling has “failed” for this reason. However, MRFs in Minnesota rely on sophisticated mechanical and manual methods of sorting to separate plastic types with great accuracy. The Dem-Con MRF in Shakopee, Minnesota is the sorting destination for many recyclables collected in the Twin Cities. They

offer in-person tours of their facility, as well as a **library of educational videos** that demonstrate how their facility operates. Bill Keegan, Dem-Con's president, offered this assurance:

**“If you put the right plastics, #1, #2, and #5 in the bin, they will get recycled. In Minnesota and across the country, there are strong end markets for #1, #2 and #5 plastics.”**

### **A state to be proud of and a path forward**

Minnesota is in a *much* different recycling position than many other states. We have many well-developed end markets for materials in the state. In 2019, 37,000 Minnesotans were employed by the recycling industry, amounting to \$2 billion in annual wages. The recycling infrastructure we've built in our state is something we can all take pride in, and is a system that's worth supporting.

Despite an already successful system, we can do more to improve recycling. Having spoken with hundreds of business owners, we know that given the necessary support, resources, and information, far more people care than don't. Initial skeptics we have met with have gone on to do incredibly successful and innovative recycling or waste reduction projects. The only thing obstructing them was misinformation and a sense of powerlessness to make change within a system that “doesn't work.” That's why Waste Wise is invested in doing our part to combat misinformation and empower people to positively impact their communities, one bottle at a time.

## *Connect with your Sustainability Specialist*

Connect with your Sustainability Specialist or get started by emailing Waste Wise at [wastewise@mnchamber.com](mailto:wastewise@mnchamber.com).

