Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems
Arizona State University

Colorado Producer Responsibility Recycling Program: Evaluating Operational Strategies, Marketing Communication Approaches, and Policy Frameworks from Europe to Canada to Ensure Best Practices for a Higher Success Rate in Compostable Packaging

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Executive Summary

Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling, established under House Bill 22-1355 in 2022, represents a significant policy shift aimed at improving recycling rates, reducing landfill waste, and transitioning to a more circular economy. The law requires producers of packaging and printed paper to fund and manage the recycling process for the materials they introduce into the market. This approach shifts the financial and operational responsibility from local governments to the producers themselves, incentivizing more sustainable product design and equitable recycling access across the state. With a goal to double the state's recycling rate from 15% by 2030, Colorado's plan positions itself as a national leader in producer responsibility.

This capstone explores how Colorado can successfully implement its Producer Responsibility Recycling Program (PRRP), especially in relation to compostable packaging, through a comparative analysis of international and national best practices. Drawing from case studies in Belgium, the EU, and Canada the research identifies operational strategies, marketing communication approaches, and policy frameworks that can inform Colorado's implementation.

The research methodology included a qualitative case study approach, policy and literature reviews, and stakeholder interviews with leaders from government, industry, and nonprofit sectors. The interviews provided first hand insights into current infrastructure challenges, labeling confusion, regional disparities, and the role of compostable packaging within the EPR (Extended Producer Responsibility) framework. Findings also reflect the importance of cross-sector collaboration and the urgency of infrastructure investment, particularly in rural areas.

Key findings emphasize the need for clear labeling standards, third-party certifications for compostables (e.g., BPI, ASTM D6400), and consistent public education to reduce contamination. International models demonstrated the value of eco-modulated fee structures, centralized PRO (Producer Responsibility Organization) governance, and performance-based compliance mechanisms. Stakeholder interviews highlighted both optimism and concern regarding infrastructure readiness and producer preparedness.

The author recommends that Colorado align its compostable packaging regulations with available processing infrastructure, implement standardized labeling, expand rural recycling services, adopt eco-modulated fees, enforce compliance equitably, and increase public outreach. These recommendations are grounded in proven practices from more mature EPR systems and tailored to Colorado's unique regional and policy landscape.

As Colorado prepares to roll out the PRRP in 2025, the findings of this capstone offer a roadmap for building a scalable, inclusive, and sustainable recycling system. The lessons drawn from international and domestic case studies provide Colorado producers, policymakers, and

communities with practical guidance to navigate the transition and support long-term environmental and economic outcomes.

Introduction

Over the past several decades, recycling systems around the world have undergone a gradual yet profound transformation in response to growing environmental concerns, increased waste generation, and the limitations of traditional municipal waste management. One of the most significant developments in this space has been the emergence of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) - a regulatory framework that assigns producers a central role in managing the end-of-life impacts of their products. Unlike conventional recycling systems that rely heavily on public funds and local governments, EPR shifts the financial and operational burden of waste management upstream, placing accountability on the producers who design, manufacture, and profit from packaged goods and other materials. The goal is to incentivize more sustainable product design, reduce landfill-bound waste, and promote a more circular economy in which materials are recovered and reused rather than discarded.

For years, the United States relied heavily on exporting recyclable materials—particularly to China—as a cost-effective strategy for managing packaging waste. However, in 2018, China implemented the National Sword Policy, which banned the import of most plastics and severely restricted contaminated paper and other recyclables. This global shift exposed the fragility of U.S. recycling systems and underscored the urgent need for domestic infrastructure capable of processing materials to a higher standard (Brooks eta., 2018). Colorado was not immune to these challenges: contamination rates spiked, and local recycling programs struggled to remain economically viable. In response, Colorado passed its Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling in 2022, becoming one of the first states to mandate that producers of packaging and printed paper fund and manage the recycling system. By integrating lessons from global disruptions like the National Sword Policy and EPR pioneers Germany and Canada, Colorado's EPR law aims to create a self-sustaining, locally driven circular economy with improved material recovery, investment in infrastructure, and producer accountability.

EPR was first formalized in the early 1990s, with Germany launching the first national system in 1991. This pioneering policy laid the groundwork for other countries to follow suit, including Canada, Italy, Belgium, and Austria—each of which has implemented EPR in ways that reflect their own political structures, economic conditions, and environmental priorities. Over the past three decades, these systems have matured through trial, error, and innovation, resulting in measurable improvements in recycling rates, packaging design, and resource recovery. International experience has shown that well-designed EPR systems can create effective incentives for industry participation, establish reliable funding mechanisms for recycling infrastructure, and deliver environmental benefits at scale. These successes have attracted the attention of policymakers in the United States, where concerns over rising packaging waste, uneven recycling access, and climate impacts have prompted calls for reform.

In the United States, momentum for EPR has grown steadily in recent years. As of 2022, five states—California, Colorado, Massachusetts, Maine, and Oregon—had enacted EPR legislation focused on packaging and printed paper. These laws signal a significant shift in how the U.S. approaches producer responsibility, setting a precedent for other states. By 2024, additional

states: Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, and Washington had introduced or advanced EPR bills of their own (Sustainable Packaging Coalition 2025). This growing policy movement suggests a broader national interest in aligning with international best practices and exploring producer-led solutions to longstanding challenges in waste management.

Among the early adopters, Colorado has emerged as a particularly notable case. With the passage of House Bill 22-1355 in 2022, the state committed to creating a comprehensive, producer-funded recycling system aimed at increasing recycling rates, expanding access, and improving equity across communities. Unlike other states, Colorado's law requires producers to fully fund a statewide recycling program. This means producers must pay 100% of the net cost of collection, sorting, and processing for covered materials, including packaging and printed paper. It also requires that all Colorado residents must have equitable and convincing access to recycling services by 2026. The Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO), known as the Circular Action Alliance (CAA), was also chosen to perform statewide to streamline coordination, centralized compliance, and operational consistency. The focus on local government support is by allowing them to opt into the new system and receive reimbursement, or continue managing waste independently. Currently, compostable packaging is not fully included in the initial scope of covered materials, but Colorado is one of a few states actively discussing how to incorporate compostables.

To operationalize EPR legislation, many jurisdictions establish Producer Responsibility Recycling Programs (PRRPs)—formal programs that outline the specific mechanisms through which producers fulfill their legal obligations. These programs often rely on PROs—industry-led, nonprofit entities tasked with organizing and managing the system. PROs are responsible for collecting fees from producers, coordinating recycling services, reporting performance, and ensuring compliance with targets and regulations. While EPR defines the broader legal framework, the PRRP serves as the functional infrastructure that makes it work. In Colorado's case, the Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling is designed to deliver a more cohesive and inclusive system that addresses disparities between urban and rural recycling access, funds improvements in local infrastructure, and promotes more sustainable packaging through upstream innovation.

Despite the promise of EPR, Colorado faces significant challenges that highlight the urgency of reform. As of 2023, the state's combined recycling and composting rate remains at just 15.5%, which is less than half the national average of 32%. This figure reflects not only insufficient infrastructure but also inconsistent recycling access, limited public education, and gaps in processing capabilities—especially for compostable or complex packaging materials. Another factor shaping Colorado's recycling and composting landscape is the availability of undeveloped land for landfill use. As of 2025, Colorado has approximately 300,000 acres of undeveloped land for sale, with prices starting around $5,900 per acre (Land.com). While this land could potentially be used for landfill development depending on zoning regulations and environmental permitting, it represents a lower-cost but less sustainable alternative to recycling or composting infrastructure. Although the upfront costs of establishing a landfill—such as land preparation, permitting, and compliance with environmental standards—are generally lower than those required to build and operate a recycling or composting facility, this approach undermines the state's long-term goals for waste diversion, circular economy development, and greenhouse gas reduction. As Colorado implements its Producer Responsibility Program, decision-makers will need to weigh short-term economic costs against the long-term environmental and societal

benefits of investing in advanced recycling and composting systems. In response, the implementation of Colorado's EPR program in 2025 presents a critical opportunity to reverse these trends and create a more resilient, efficient, and circular waste system.

As Colorado prepares to implement its PRRP, there is much to learn from the experiences of countries with more mature EPR systems. These models emphasize the importance of transparent governance, clearly defined producer roles, and the use of financial incentives to drive compliance and innovation. Additionally, as interest in compostable packaging grows, lessons from British Columbia's regulatory approach and the European Union's Single-Use Plastics Directive shed light on how to balance environmental ambitions with practical realities in waste processing. These international examples underscore the need for well-aligned policy, infrastructure investment, and market development to ensure that compostable and recyclable materials are effectively managed.

By examining global approaches to EPR and PRRP implementation, this capstone aims to identify actionable strategies that can enhance Colorado's program design and execution. Drawing on cross-jurisdictional comparisons, the analysis highlights both opportunities and potential pitfalls in the state's evolving policy landscape. Ultimately, the goal is to support Colorado in establishing a producer responsibility system that is not only effective and equitable but also scalable and replicable across the United States.

Research Methodology and Data Collection

This capstone utilizes a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine how Extended Producer Responsibility systems, particularly those addressing compostable packaging, have been implemented in Belgium, Canada, and Colorado. The goal is to extract best practices, operational strategies, communication approaches, and policy frameworks that can inform the development and refinement of Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling, set to roll out in 2025.

The methodology is grounded in a literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles, policy reports, government documents, and industry publications published within the last 10 years. Sources were identified through academic databases such as Scopus, JSTOR, and Google Scholar, as well as through grey literature and official documents from Producer Responsibility Organization CAA, government agencies such as Colorado Department of Health And Environment, and nonprofits like Recycle Colorado.

Three main thematic lenses—operational strategies, marketing communication, and policy frameworks—were used to code and analyze data. These themes guided the comparison between case studies, allowing for a structured assessment of how each jurisdiction manages compostable packaging within EPR systems.

Additionally, content analysis was conducted on key documents including Colorado's 2023 Needs Assessment, the 2025 Plan Proposal, and legislation such as HB22-1355 to contextualize the state's policy direction. To supplement this analysis, stakeholder perspectives were incorporated through an interview and published commentary. Interview requests were extended to a compostable packaging and manufacturing company based in Colorado (which requested anonymity), the Sustainability Manager for the City and County of Denver, the nonprofit organization Recycle Colorado, and two major waste haulers—Waste Management, the largest operator of landfills in the state, and Republic Services, which launched a new recycling facility in 2024. These stakeholder insights helped illuminate both the practical challenges and strategic opportunities facing producers as Colorado transitions toward statewide EPR implementation. Interview results were from the local compostable packaging and manufacturing company, Sustainability Manager for the Denver International Airport, and the Executive Director of Recycle Colorado.

Portions of this capstone project were supported through the use of artificial intelligence tools, including OpenAI's ChatGPT, which was used for idea development, drafting assistance, summarizing literature, and refining written content. All outputs were critically reviewed and edited by the author to ensure accuracy, originality, and alignment with academic standards.

The findings aim to support actionable recommendations for Colorado producers and policymakers by highlighting scalable models and identifying potential barriers to success in compostable packaging management under EPR.

Landscape Analysis

Extended Producer Responsibility is an environmental policy approach aimed at reducing the overall environmental impact of products by assigning full lifecycle responsibility to producers. This includes the responsibility for the take-back, recycling, and final disposal of products after consumer use. As Lindhqvist (2000) describes, EPR shifts the burden of waste management upstream to manufacturers, incentivizing them to design more sustainable products from the outset. The implementation of EPR can vary depending on the mix of operational strategies, economic and marketing approaches, and policy, which collectively define how responsibility is distributed and enforced. This framework forms the foundation of many international waste management systems and is now central to Colorado's emerging Producer Responsibility Program for packaging.

The EPR or PRP for Colorado ensures that producers—not consumers or local governments—are responsible for the environmental impacts of their products throughout their lifecycle. Without EPR, key costs like collection, recycling, or composting often fall outside the price of the product. It leaves buyers unaware of the true environmental footprint. This lack of transparency can discourage sustainable choices and lead producers to overlook waste management considerations during product design. As Colorado rolls out its PRP, integrating these costs into the system will be essential to shift both consumer behavior and industry practices toward more sustainable outcomes (Lindhqvist, 2000).

The enforcement of this new policy for Colorado will also be a challenge as it has been with other EPRs internationally and within the United States. Inconsistent enforcement undermines the integrity and fairness of the EPR systems. When producers avoid paying fees to the PROs, they not only reduce their own costs but also shift the financial burden onto compliant producers. This free-rider problem threatens the financial sustainability of the system and can disincentivize participation. Moreover, when waste collection or treatment providers operate outside the formal EPR framework without facing equivalent regulatory oversight, the quality and consistency of services are compromised. For an EPR system to function effectively—particularly in emerging programs like Colorado's—robust and transparent enforcement mechanisms are essential to ensure accountability and maintain a level playing field across the value chain (OECD, 2016). The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment (CDPHE) will be responsible for enforcing the Producer Responsibility Program for Colorado. According to the CAA, Colorado's Annual Report will incorporate compliance monitoring to identify producers who are not meeting their obligations under the Producer Responsibility Program. Noncompliance may include late registration, delayed or inaccurate reporting, insufficient methodological transparency, or failure to remit payments on time. In such cases, penalties may be imposed and enforced by the executive director of the CDPHE (CAA, 2025).

Colorado has developed a Needs Assessment in 2025 to combat these challenges while highlighting a statistical summary of the state. The purpose of the assessment is to evaluate existing services and recycling infrastructure of single-use packaging and paper products. The

analysisof the assessment included statistical data from curbside pickup, drop-off collection, transfer stations, compost sites, and the path from in and out of state markets. The goal was to develop a recycling system infrastructure that could be implemented by the PRO. The submission of the assessment to the Joint Budget Committee was to approve the “medium” scenario that would aim to increase the recycling rate of packaging and paper products from the current 22-28% to 52-58% by 2035 (CAA 2024.) The scenario includes expansion to 500,000 additional households particularly in the Western Slope and rural areas. The infrastructure will increase the investments of the state’s materials recovery facilities to handle the 60% increase of recyclables. The marketing will also be reevaluated to include a standardized list for recyclable materials. This implementation of the medium scenario is estimated to cost between $160 million and $260 million by 2030, with costs rising to between $190 million and $310 million by 2035. These investments are expected to more than double the annual tonnage of recycled materials, from 310,000 tons to up to 720,000 tons (Sealover 2024). The CAA used this foundational assessment in the 2025 Colorado Plan Proposal to formally illustrate how the PRP will be implemented across the state. This forward-thinking approach aligns with global best practices in EPR implementation. Examining international case studies can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for producer responsibility, offering lessons that can inform and enhance Colorado's efforts to build a robust and sustainable recycling program.

Case Studies

The growing challenge of waste management, particularly packaging waste, has prompted the development of regulatory frameworks aimed at improving recycling rates and reducing environmental harm. The EPR is increasingly seen as a crucial tool for achieving circular economy goals by shifting the financial and operational burden of waste management from consumers and municipalities to producers. Over the past few decades, governments around the world—particularly in Europe and Canada—have implemented EPR systems, offering valuable lessons in the design, implementation, and challenges of such programs.

In Colorado, the passage of House Bill 22-1355 in 2022 marked a significant step toward statewide recycling reform. This legislation mandates that producers of packaging and printed paper fund and manage a comprehensive recycling system through a designated nonprofit organization, known as a Producer Responsibility Organization. The Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment is tasked with overseeing the program, ensuring compliance, and facilitating collaboration between stakeholders.

By examining the experiences of international jurisdictions that have pioneered EPR, this review aims to identify operational strategies, marketing communication approaches, and policy frameworks that could be applied to Colorado’s unique context. The goal is to provide a solid foundation for understanding the potential impacts of EPR in Colorado, drawing on the experiences of other regions to inform the state’s strategy for a more sustainable and efficient recycling system.

Belgium, EU

Belgium stands out as a European leader in EPR implementation, driven in large part by its national PRO, Fost Plus. While Belgium's system excels in traditional recyclable materials, the integration of compostable packaging into its EPR framework presents both opportunities and challenges for emerging systems like Colorado's.

Operational Strategies

Operationally, Belgium's waste management system is highly centralized and harmonized under Fost Plus, which manages household packaging collection and recycling. However, compostable packaging is still a developing category. As of recent reports, Belgium does not include compostable packaging under the same reimbursement structure as recyclable packaging, unless it meets certain EN 13432 certification standards (European Commission, 2020). This standard ensures that compostable products biodegrade in industrial composting conditions within 90 days, leaving no toxic residue.

Collection systems in Belgium remain separate: organics are gathered in bio waste streams. However, there is confusion over compostable plastics which leads to contamination, especially in packaging that resembles conventional plastic. To address this, Belgium is testing pilot programs in municipalities like Leuven, where labeled bins and public outreach are used to guide correct disposal (Van Ewijk & Oosterhuis, 2022).

These efforts highlight the importance of clear collection infrastructure and the need for industrial composting capacity, something Colorado producers must anticipate as they innovate in compostable formats.

Marketing and Communication Approaches

Belgium places strong emphasis on consumer education and standardized labeling. Compostable packaging must bear proper logos (e.g., OK compost or EN 13432-certified marks) to differentiate them from recyclable or landfill-bound materials. Mislabeling is considered greenwashing and can be penalized under consumer protection laws (Fost Plus, 2023).

Campaigns led by Fost Plus and local authorities focus on instructing consumers about sorting rules. For example, "Sort Smart" campaigns emphasize that not all bioplastics belong in the organic waste bin unless they are certified and accepted by local composting systems.

Next door, Germany's Packaging Act (VerpackG) mandates that producers must participate in a national recycling system. Producers are required to register their packaging with a dual system (Green Dot), ensuring that their materials are recycled through a certified system. This law has been effective in reducing packaging waste and improving collection and recycling systems. GreenDot ceased operations in North America in 2024 "due to a strategic shift to focus on more mature regulatory markets and growing demand for circular polymers and recycled materials in Europe" (Heffernan, 2024). In addition, products marked with the *EU Ecolabel* indicate that they meet environmental standards, guiding consumers towards more sustainable choices.

As communication missteps contribute heavily to contamination, Colorado producers introducing compostables should consider co-developing public-facing materials with their PRO to prevent consumer confusion if international companies such as GreenDot are no longer available.

Policy Frameworks

Belgium's broader policy framework supports compostables through European Union directives and national regulations. While the EU Waste Framework Directive and Single-Use Plastics Directive emphasize waste prevention and material recovery, Belgium's implementation focuses more stringently on recyclables. Compostables are treated cautiously due to infrastructure gaps and lifecycle concerns (European Parliament, 2019). The EU's Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive requires all EU member states to establish EPR schemes for packaging waste. This directive ensures that producers are responsible for financing and managing the recycling and disposal of packaging waste.

European EPR systems are often built around strict recycling and recovery targets, with penalties for non-compliance. These legally binding targets push producers and municipalities to meet recycling quotas and make progress toward circular economy goals. For example: France has set ambitious targets for recycling and composting. The country's "Anti-Waste Law" (AGEC) requires that by 2025, all plastic packaging in France must be recyclable or compostable. This legislation forces producers to innovate and adapt their packaging materials to comply with sustainability goals. In addition to packaging, many European countries have included compostable products in their EPR frameworks. These policies encourage the diversion of organic waste from landfills to composting facilities.

As Colorado implements its Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling, it can draw from these European models by emphasizing coordinated infrastructure, mandatory compostability standards, and strong incentives. Tailoring these proven strategies to Colorado's local context will be essential to building an EPR system that is both sustainable and scalable as the state navigates the complexities of compostable packaging and circular economy goals.

British Columbia, Canada

British Columbia has implemented one of North America's most mature EPR systems through the PRO, Recycle BC, established in 2014. Canada provides particularly relevant comparisons for Colorado due to its decentralized governance model and diverse geography. British Columbia, Ontario, and Quebec have developed EPR frameworks that balance provincial regulations with industry autonomy. British Columbia, in particular, has become a North American leader in EPR through its full producer responsibility model, where Recycle BC oversees everything from collection to education. A 2022 report by Recycle BC found that the province's extended producer responsibility program provides over 85% of residents with access to recycling services, with notable success in rural and remote areas—paralleling Colorado's own challenges with regional service disparities (Recycle BC, 2022).

Operational Strategies

Recycle BC's system is built on full producer responsibility, requiring producers to finance and manage the entire recycling chain—from curbside collection to processing. However, compostable packaging is currently excluded from Recycle BC's accepted material list (Recycle BC, 2023). This exclusion is based on two factors: (1) the incompatibility of most compostable packaging with recycling or composting infrastructure, and (2) the high risk of contamination in both organics and plastics streams. These are issues that challenge EPR laws around the world, but the way in which BC addresses it is worth examining.

Instead of co-mingling, British Columbia encourages producers to ensure compostables meet third-party certifications such as BPI (Biodegradable Products Institute) or EN 13432 to be potentially accepted in industrial composting systems. However, municipal composting infrastructure is limited and varies regionally. For example, Metro Vancouver facilities are more advanced, while rural regions may lack the equipment to handle compostable plastics, even those that are certified.

For Colorado, this highlights the need for localized infrastructure mapping and stronger coordination between producers and composters to ensure that packaging innovations do not outpace system capabilities. Although Colorado is the eighth largest state by area, it has relatively few recycling and composting facilities within its borders.

Marketing and Communication Approaches

Consumer confusion is a major issue in British Columbia due to misleading environmental claims. A 2021 study by the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) found that many products labeled as “biodegradable” or “compostable” failed to meet regulatory standards or provide disposal instructions, leading to misplaced waste and increased contamination (CSA Group, 2021). The term “biodegradable” is widely regarded as problematic in the context of end-of-life communication. It fails to specify the environmental conditions or time frames under which degradation occurs, leading to consumer confusion and improper disposal behaviors. More critically, so-called “biodegradable” products are often visually indistinguishable from certified compostable materials, contributing to the proliferation of “lookalike” items that contaminate composting streams. This issue has become so disruptive that several U.S. states—including California, Washington, Maryland, and Minnesota—have enacted legislation banning the use of the term “biodegradable” in the marketing of single-use products (BPI, 2023). To combat this, the Government of British Columbia and Recycle BC have promoted truth-in-labeling practices, discouraging vague sustainability claims, and emphasizing the need for clear disposal instructions. Producers are advised to use standardized icons and disclaimers to educate consumers about proper end-of-life pathways (Recycle BC, 2023).

Policy Frameworks

British Columbia operates under a strong provincial EPR policy framework enforced by the Recycling Regulation (B.C. Reg. 449/2004), which mandates producer responsibility for the packaging they place on the market. Although compostables are not currently included, the province has signaled openness to future inclusion depending on infrastructure and market readiness. Furthermore, the Canadian federal government has proposed national standards for compostable products as part of its Zero Plastic Waste Agenda. These would require producers to meet end-of-life performance standards and demonstrate access to appropriate composting facilities before marketing compostable packaging (Government of Canada, 2022).

This evolving policy landscape signals that while compostables are not yet fully integrated into the EPR stream, regulatory inclusion is forthcoming—and producers must begin investing in packaging design, testing, and certification aligned with future standards. Canadian policies increasingly reward companies for developing sustainable packaging solutions. Policies often offer financial incentives or credits for the use of recyclable, compostable, or minimal packaging, promoting innovation in product design. The Ontario Blue Box Program incentivizes companies to reduce their packaging through performance-based fees, encouraging producers to design products with minimal environmental impact. In British Columbia, regulations ensure compostable materials are collected separately and are sent to composting facilities, preventing

contamination of the standard recycling system. Canada's experience with EPRs highlights the importance of operational clarity, public engagement, and progressive legislation in building effective recycling systems. By clearly defining producer roles, leveraging PROs, and educating the public with transparent labeling, Canadian provinces have created more consistent and accountable systems.

As Colorado implements its statewide EPR program, these lessons can guide producers and policymakers to design compostable packaging strategies that align with infrastructure, engage consumers responsibly, and ensure regulatory alignment.

Colorado

The European nations and Canada have paved the way for the United States to follow their lead in the recycling movement of producer responsibility of waste. Colorado is one of the first states to sign legislation into law to "evolutionize" this movement. Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program, established under HB22-1355, is a statewide initiative designed to shift the financial and operational responsibility of managing packaging waste from local governments to the companies that produce and sell packaged goods. Starting in 2025, this law requires producers of packaging materials—such as plastic, paper, metal, and glass—to join the PRO called Circular Action Alliance, which will oversee the funding and implementation of comprehensive recycling systems across the state. The CAA is actively engaging with stakeholders to develop a comprehensive plan that aligns with the state's recycling goals. Stakeholder engagement is central to the successful rollout of Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program, and several statewide organizations have taken leadership roles in this transition.

The Colorado Municipal League (CML), a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization representing 271 cities and towns across the state, advocates for policies that reflect the needs of local governments. Their involvement ensures that municipal voices are included in the development of equitable and effective recycling systems. Recycle Colorado, another key partner, is a statewide nonprofit dedicated to building a circular economy and improving recycling infrastructure. United by a vision to make Colorado a national leader in waste reduction, materials recovery, and diversion, Recycle Colorado works closely with policymakers, producers, and recyclers to align infrastructure, education, and implementation strategies. Together, CML and Recycle Colorado have launched educational webinars and distributed resource materials to help local governments prepare for the program's rollout. These initiatives aim to ensure that all Coloradans—regardless of geography—have convenient access to recycling services at no additional cost.

The program specifically targets packaging and printed paper, aiming to reduce landfill waste, improve recycling rates, and harmonize recycling access throughout Colorado. The goal of this legislation is to provide consistent recycling services to at least 95% of Colorado residents by 2030 and increase recycling diversion to over 30% from 15% currently, bringing it in line with the national average. The policy has several key elements that will be needed for success that align with both the EU and Canada. The program will need to consist of producers financing the collection, transportation, and processing of recyclable packaging materials. The fees will need to be structured based on the recyclability of the packages and can be utilized for incentivizing

sustainable packaging design.

Figure 1: EcoProducts Veridian product line. Which showcases compliance with the new EPR law that requires green tint to indicate it is compostable.

The Colorado-based company EcoProducts has partnered with CAA for these standards. The labeling requirements for compostable packaging began in 2024 with bioplastic and bioplastic-lined items. The packaging must have the word “compostable,” a third-party certification logo, meet the ASTM (Advancing Standards Transforming Markets) standards, and utilize green tinting for Colorado packaging.

The overarching goal of the PRP is to create a circular economy for packaging, where materials are designed for recovery and re-use rather than disposal. As implementation begins, Colorado producers must evaluate packaging portfolios, explore compostable options aligned with local infrastructure, and prepare to comply with the forthcoming eco-modulation and labeling standards.

As Colorado prepares for the implementation of its Producer Responsibility Program for Statewide Recycling in 2025, the state finds itself in a pivotal transition. Until recently, Colorado lacked a centralized framework for producer responsibility, leading to fragmented recycling services, low diversion rates, and inconsistent treatment of emerging materials such as compostable packaging.

Operational Strategies

Prior to the EPR legislation, Colorado's waste management system operated on a patchwork model, with recycling and composting services largely managed by municipalities or private haulers. This resulted in significant regional disparities—urban areas like Boulder and Denver had some curbside composting access, while rural and mountainous communities often had no organic diversion infrastructure. Compostable packaging was accepted inconsistently and often treated as contamination due to lack of processing capacity and confusion over labeling.

A1 Organics, Colorado's largest and longest-running composting company, exemplifies both the potential and challenges of scaling organics recycling in the state. Family-owned and operated since 1974, A1 Organics diverts over 425,000 tons of organic waste from Colorado landfills each year, transforming it into high-quality composts, mulches, and soil products. With operations in Eaton, Keenesburg, Commerce City, and Englewood, A1 serves a wide range of clients—from municipalities and institutions to landscapers and home gardeners.

However, A1 Organics has also had to enforce strict contamination controls due to the high volume of non-compostable materials entering its facilities. In response, the company now inspects all incoming truckloads and rejects those containing unacceptable levels of contamination. Since contaminants cannot be effectively removed once mixed with organics, entire loads are turned away—an outcome that undermines efficiency and adds cost to the system (Brasch, 2022).

The 2025 EPR law mandates that producers fund and manage the recycling system for packaging and printed paper, but compostables are not yet clearly defined within the law's scope. However, as Colorado continues to evolve the operational model, consistencies among EPRs are highlighted. Colorado will need to assess waste facility readiness to process compostable materials, especially in the industrial composting industry. The regions are vastly different across the state, creating challenges over landscapes and year-round weather-related issues that often cause road closures or delays. The infrastructure for recyclables statewide will be pivotal to the success. As the CAA continues to increase the number of producers and waste collectors, a set of operating procedures will need to be implemented such as a phased integration strategy to avoid contamination risks.

Marketing and Communication Approaches

Prior to passage of the EPR, Colorado was absent of any regulation of labeling on consumer or industrial products. Once the PRO was established as the CAA, it began working with the rollout of the EPR in order to help to standardize the communication and regulate marketing claims. Prior to the EPR, producers could label items as "biodegradable" or "eco-friendly" without ensuring those items met recognized standards or could be properly processed in Colorado facilities. The label miscommunication contributed to greenwashing and widespread consumer confusion, causing recycling rates to remain low. EPR best practices to avoid these issues would include requiring a third-party to certify compostable products making environmental claims such as previously mentioned BPI or ASTM. Colorado will also need to develop statewide labeling guidelines that will identify packaging that can be recycled or composted.

Colorado producers will need to adopt a clear conclusive language that is aligned with third-party certifications (e.g., BPI, ASTM D6400, or EN 13432). It will be essential to maintain trust and functionality in the state's evolving EPR framework.

Policy Frameworks

Colorado's previous waste diversion efforts relied heavily on voluntary actions and local ordinances with no producer responsibility mandates in place. Composting policies varied by jurisdiction, and there was no unified strategy for addressing compostable packaging at the state level. Producers had little incentive to design for recyclability or compostability resulting in inconsistent material performance and end-of-life outcomes.

The passage of HB22-1355 represents a paradigm shift in the state's materials management system. However, compostable packaging remains a gray area within the law, as it focuses primarily on recyclable packaging and printed paper. Key policy development areas now include clarifying whether compostables will be included in future phases of the EPR and under what criteria, data-driven reporting requirements including contamination rates, and increased support for fees or grants that can help finance the producers. A transparent and enforceable policy framework will be essential to ensure that compostable packaging does not undermine the goals of the EPR system.

Challenges

Colorado faces several significant challenges as it moves to implement its Producer Responsibility Program. A major concern is the state's insufficient recycling and composting infrastructure, particularly in rural and underserved areas where access to curbside recycling is inconsistent and industrial composting facilities are rare as on the Western Slope (West of the Rocky Mountains). This creates a critical mismatch between the growing use of compostable packaging and the ability of the system to process it effectively. Without the proper infrastructure to sort and manage these materials, compostables often contaminate recycling streams and vice versa, undermining system efficiency.

Producer preparedness presents another hurdle. While larger corporations such as Waste Management, the state's largest hauler, may have the capacity to adapt to EPR regulations, many small and mid-sized businesses in Colorado are unfamiliar with producer responsibility frameworks. These producers may struggle with new reporting requirements, eco-modulated fee structures, and the need to redesign packaging to align with recycling and composting capabilities.

In addition, public awareness remains limited. BPI is North America's leading certifier of compostable products and packaging. It is a nonprofit organization that certifies materials according to scientifically based standards like ASTM D6400 and ASTM D6868. ASTM D6400 and ASTM D6868 are standards that certify plastics and packaging as compostable in industrial composting facilities, with D6400 applying to fully compostable plastics and D6868 covering compostable products made with compostable plastic coatings on paper or other substrates. BPI states that there is widespread confusion among consumers about the differences between compostable, recyclable, and biodegradable packaging. Misleading terminology, such as the use of "biodegradable" on non-compostable products, exacerbates contamination and undermines consumer trust. Without a consistent, statewide labeling system and education campaign, even well-intentioned consumers may mis-sort materials.

Policy complexity and enforcement further complicate implementation. Many critical details—including how compostables will be integrated into the program and how producer fees will be calculated—are still being finalized. This uncertainty creates hesitation among producers and slows planning efforts. Moreover, enforcing compliance will require extensive coordination between the state, the CAA, and independent third-party auditors. Finally, successful implementation depends on effective alignment across stakeholders. Coordination between producers, municipalities, recyclers, and composters is essential to ensure the program's success. Of particular importance is the early and sustained involvement of composting facilities, which will be key to setting standards for compostable packaging that are both practical and enforceable. Currently, A1 Organics recycles commercially throughout the state. Colorado Recycle has curbside pickup in a very small area of the state, suggesting infrastructure will need to be revitalized.

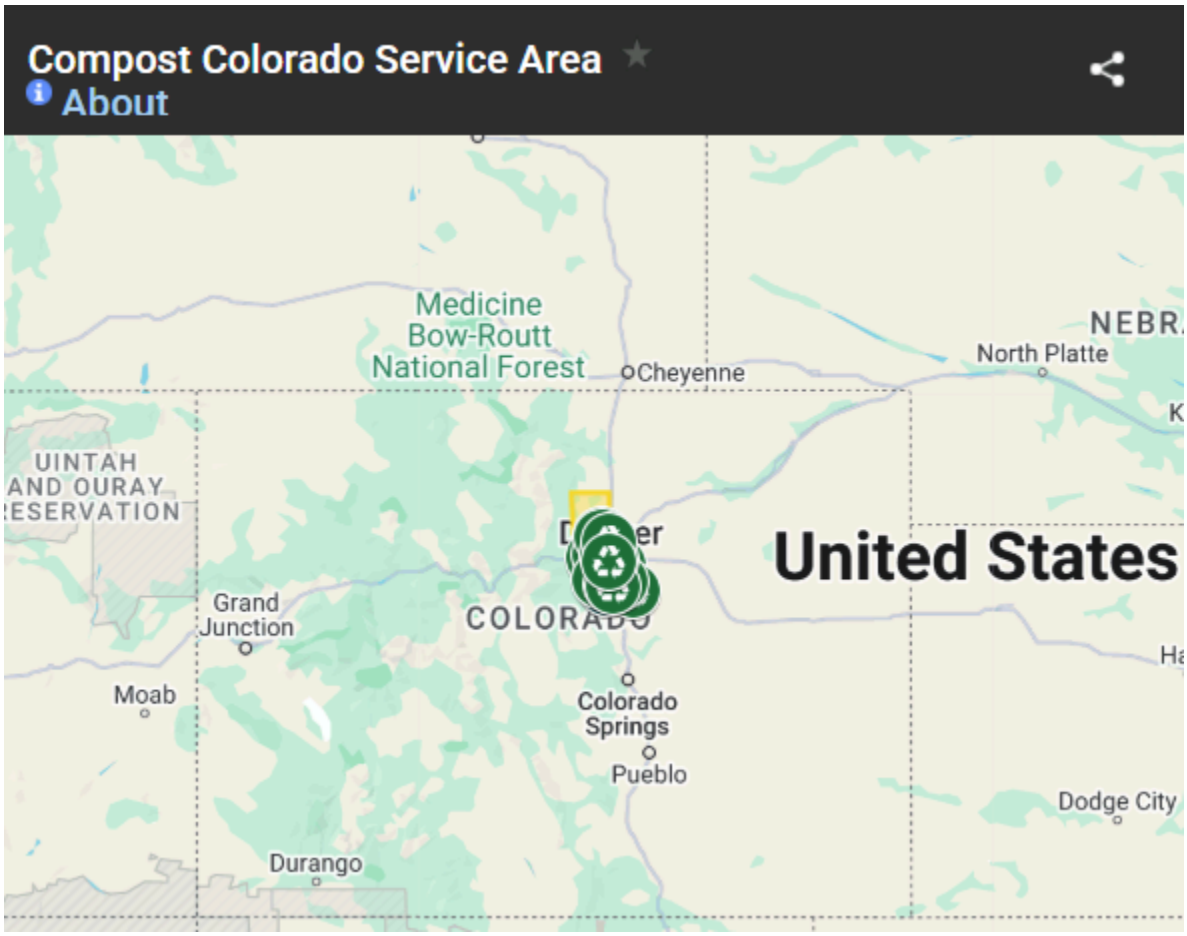

Figure 2: Map of Compost Colorado's curbside pick up for residential as of 2025 state overview.. It is concentrated on the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in metropolitan Denver and Boulder County. Illustrates the state's lack of coverage in different regions.

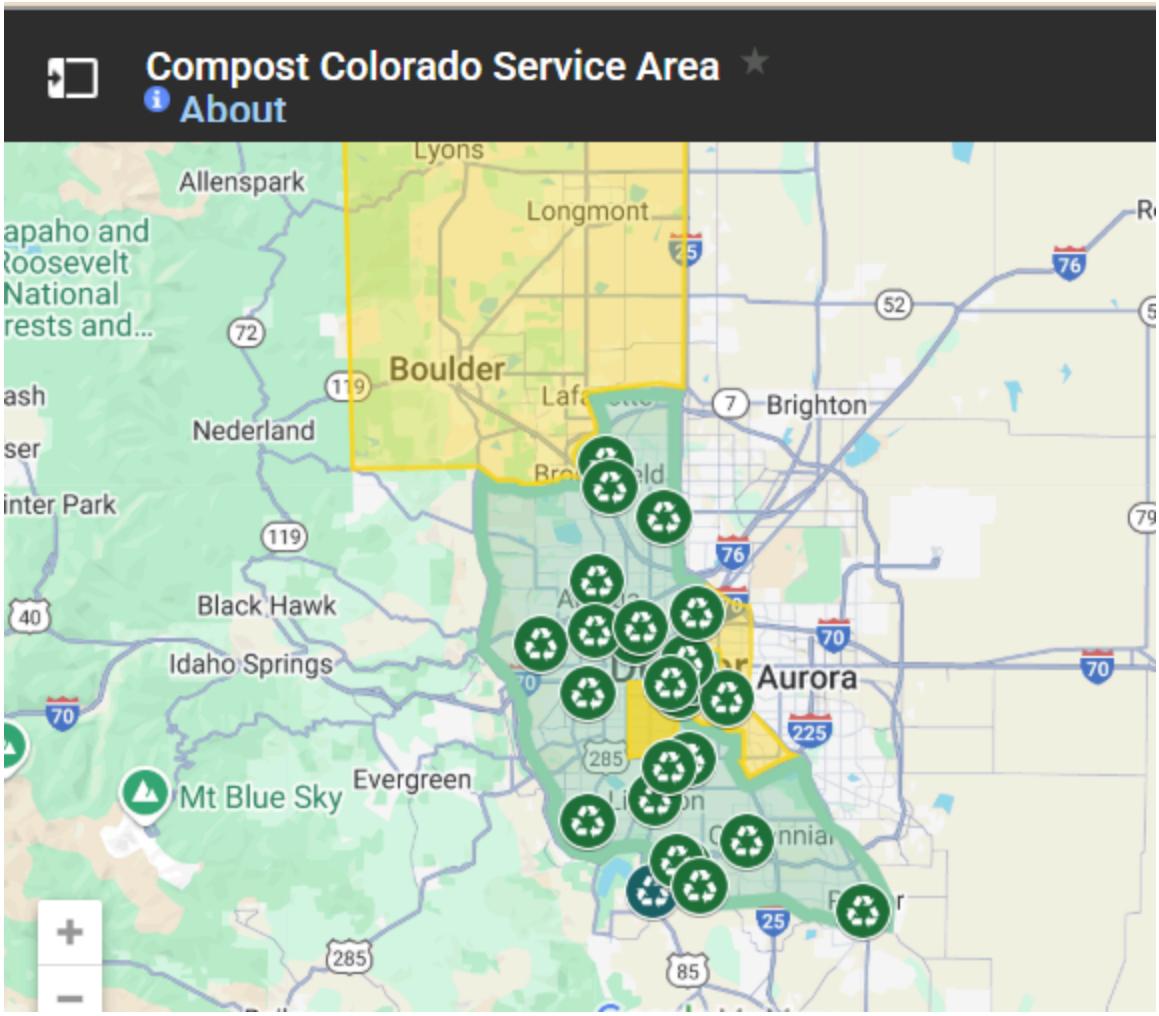

Figure 3: Map of Compost Colorado's curbside pick up for residential as of 2025 zoomed in to show cities surrounding the Denver metropolitan area.

To overcome these interconnected challenges, Colorado must invest in infrastructure, support producer education and transition efforts, clarify regulatory expectations, and launch coordinated public outreach initiatives. Drawing from the experiences of jurisdictions like Belgium and British Columbia, Colorado can build a strong, adaptive EPR program that balances environmental goals with practical implementation on the ground.

Interview Insights

Interviews were conducted by a 10-question survey includedt in Appendix A. Participants included Colorado industry leaders from a local compostable packaging and manufacturing company (CPMC), the Sustainability Manager from Denver International Airport, David Fridland, and the Executive Director from the non-profit organization, Recycle Colorado, Dr. Liz Chapman.

Recycling Background
All three interviewees have taken significant roles in advancing recycling and composting in their respective sectors. Recycle Colorado emphasized its nonprofit mission to support the capture of materials in both recycling and organics systems, with a strong focus on compostable foodservice packaging and advocating for policies and infrastructure that reduce contamination and support end-market demand for compost. The CPMC noted its commitment to designing certified compostable products that align with existing composting systems, including efforts to address biodegradation and reduce contamination from non-compostables. Meanwhile, the Denver International Airport (DEN) sustainability manager outlined a range of operational recycling initiatives, including single-stream recycling, back-of-house composting, and specialized streams like pallet, metal, and plastic film recycling—highlighting these in DEN's broader ESG strategy.

All three interviewees demonstrated familiarity with Colorado's Producer Responsibility Plan , with some playing a direct role in its development and ongoing implementation. Dr. Liz Chapman, Executive Director of Recycle Colorado, has been instrumental in shaping the legislation and continues to lead education and outreach efforts across the state. As she explained, *"Recycle Colorado was the key nonprofit organization which advocated for that legislation and has been actively involved in supporting the implementation. Primarily, through the appointment of the Executive Director (Dr. Liz Chapman) to the Advisory Board (currently serving as Chair), but also through webinar hosted on our website and in partnership with Colorado Municipal League. Further, we frequently speak at conferences about the program and meet with local governments to explain how it is supposed to work."*

This leadership from nonprofit organizations such as Recycle Colorado has proven essential in mobilizing support and clarifying expectations for other stakeholders—municipalities, producers, and waste service providers alike—as the state prepares for full implementation. The interviews indicate that Colorado's approach is not only policy-driven, but also strengthened by cross-sector collaboration and consistent public engagement.

Marketing and Communication Approaches
The marketing strategy efforts for recycling to the public vary among the organizations interviewed. Recycle Colorado does not market directly to the public but supports member organizations—both public and private—that do. The CPMC actively engages in public education about composting through its website, using videos and informational content to

promote proper composting practices and raise awareness. In contrast, the DEN does not emphasize public marketing for recycling; instead, it focuses on providing access to recycling infrastructure and relies on user participation without significant promotional outreach.

All interviewees agreed that while Colorado has some existing infrastructure to support compostable packaging, it is not yet sufficient to fully meet the needs of the Producer Responsibility Program. They clarified that compostable packaging is not recycled but must be processed through commercial composting facilities, which require distinct education, collection, and processing systems. Interviewees emphasized that success depends on reducing contamination, expanding infrastructure, and securing funding through the EPR system. They also highlighted the importance of stronger collaboration with haulers, generators, and compost end-users to ensure the system functions effectively.

Interviewees had mixed perspectives on how compostable packaging and labeling might impact food consumption in Colorado. One respondent clarified that while compostable packaging must already be certified under existing state law—independent of the EPR program—this doesn't necessarily influence food consumption itself. Others noted that clearer labeling and wider use of compostable materials could improve public awareness and behaviors around waste disposal, leading to increased diversion of both food waste and packaging from landfills to composting facilities. In particular, properly labeled and certified compostable packaging could help capture more post-consumer food waste, contributing to broader sustainability goals.

Operational Strategies

When asked whether Colorado's current infrastructure is sufficient to support the Producer Responsibility Plan, all interviewees expressed concern about existing limitations. They emphasized that the current recycling and composting systems are inadequate to meet the program's goals. One respondent stated directly, *"With the current infrastructure, no, which is why HB22-1355 requires the Producer Responsibility Organization to fund the development of new infrastructure and to improve existing infrastructure. These infrastructure developments represent the majority of the investments the PRO will make early on in the program to make the system capable of collecting and processing the additional tonnage.* (Chapman)*"*

Another interviewee highlighted the importance of the recently completed needs assessment as a critical first step in determining the scale of investment required, noting, *"We need more infrastructure without a doubt"* (Furiland) These insights reinforce the conclusion that for Colorado's EPR program to succeed, substantial infrastructure expansion and modernization must be prioritized early in the implementation process.

Interviewees also acknowledged that Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program will impact producers differently based on their size. Small producers with less than $5 million in gross sales are exempt, meaning they will benefit from improved recycling systems without bearing the costs. Larger producers, many of whom supported the legislation, will face new financial responsibilities as they work toward meeting recycled content goals. While EPR is expected to increase costs for producers—particularly for compostable packaging due to limited

infrastructure—interviewees generally agreed that the cost shift from consumers to producers is fair and necessary to create a more sustainable system.

When asked about plans to expand recycling and composting services to the Western Slope, southern, and eastern Colorado, interviewees expressed a range of perspectives grounded in their organizational roles. Chapman from Recycle Colorado shared, *"We have a Greater Colorado Council whose focus areas include expanding recycling in those areas of the state. Our webinar series with the Colorado Municipal League is part of our efforts to prepare underserved areas for the upcoming increase in recycling options when the program launches."* This highlights a targeted approach to rural outreach and education.

Another interviewee noted existing infrastructure for composting already in place across parts of rural Colorado, stating, *"There is some great infrastructure for composting food and compostable products in these regions. Of course, it can always grow, but these smaller compost facilities are dedicated to organics diversion and doing great things. We support additional expansion in these areas* (CPMC)*."* This view emphasizes both progress and the need for continued investment.

Summary

Interviews with stakeholders from Recycle Colorado, CPMC, and Denver International Airport revealed strong support for Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program, alongside key concerns about infrastructure, public education, and compostable packaging integration. While all participants were familiar with the legislation, they emphasized that current infrastructure is insufficient to meet its goals—particularly for compostables—though efforts like the Needs Assessment and planned investments offer a path forward. Opinions varied on public outreach, with some actively engaging in composting education and others focusing on providing access. The program's exemption for small producers was seen as fair, while large producers are expected to take on new costs. Stakeholders also expressed cautious optimism about expanding services to underserved regions and agreed that compostable packaging could succeed if contamination, labeling, and infrastructure challenges are addressed.

Recommendations

As Colorado advances the implementation of its Producer Responsibility Program for packaging and paper products, it stands at a pivotal moment to design a system that is both effective and forward-looking. Drawing from stakeholder interviews, state policy documents, and international case studies—particularly from Germany and Canada—this section offers recommendations to support the program's success, with special attention to compostable packaging integration and rural access.

One of the most significant challenges raised by stakeholders is the gap between the growing use of compostable packaging and the limited capacity of composting infrastructure to process these materials. Case studies from British Columbia highlight the importance of regulating compostable claims and certifying materials to reduce contamination. Colorado should adopt similar standards, ensuring that only third-party-certified compostable products (e.g., BPI, ASTM D6400) are accepted and that these certifications align with the capabilities of regional composters like A1 Organics.

Germany's Packaging Act mandates clear labeling and public education to reduce contamination—practices that have contributed to recycling rates above 60%. Colorado should implement standardized labeling protocols for compostable and recyclable materials, accompanied by a statewide education campaign to help consumers distinguish between streams. Collaboration with nonprofits like Recycle Colorado can extend reach into local communities.

Access gaps on the Western Slope, southern, and eastern Colorado threaten program equity. Drawing from Canada's efforts to ensure EPR coverage in remote areas (e.g., through Recycle BC's extended service models), Colorado should invest in rural collection systems and small-scale composting facilities. The PRO CAA should administer infrastructure grants and technical assistance programs for local governments and operators serving hard-to-reach areas.

Germany and Quebec both use eco-modulated fees—charging higher rates for non-recyclable or non-compostable materials and offering incentives for sustainable design. Colorado should adopt this model to drive packaging innovation while balancing the financial burden across material types. This approach also helps mitigate higher costs typically associated with compostable foodservice packaging, as noted by interviewees.

Stakeholders emphasized that a fair system must include strong enforcement mechanisms. Informed by Canada's PRO oversight structure and Germany's registration system, Colorado should publish a regularly updated compliance list and work with the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment to monitor producer participation, reporting accuracy, and

payment compliance. Noncompliance should trigger enforceable penalties to protect system equity.

Building on the success of Recycle Colorado's webinars and municipal outreach, CAA and CDPHE should institutionalize regular stakeholder engagement—especially with composters, haulers, local governments, and rural communities. Advisory feedback loops should be built into the system's governance to allow flexible, iterative updates as the program matures.

Finally, Colorado should adopt the performance-based culture seen in British Columbia and Germany, where producer reporting, collection rates, and material flows are publicly tracked. Transparent, annual reporting will allow CAA and state agencies to assess progress, adjust policies, and ensure that the program evolves to meet its diversion goals and compostable packaging integration.

Conclusion

Colorado's EPR program represents a transformative opportunity to create a more resilient, circular economy. By learning from international leaders and tailoring proven strategies to the local context, Colorado can build a recycling and composting system that is equitable, scalable, and environmentally impactful—serving as a national model for next-generation producer responsibility.

About the Author

Sarah Kirby
Sarah lives in Colorado Springs, CO. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Sustainability from the University of Louisville in Louisville, KY, where she was also the sustainability intern for Aramark. She managed the vertical garden tower by educating students and staff. She went back to earn this degree twelve years after receiving her Associate of Arts degree from the University of Central Arkansas in Conway, AR. She had also started a farmer's market during COVID to support the local community, which consistently held 25 vendors and was deemed a Kentucky Proud market. The pandemic sparked her passion in sustainability as the opportunities in the food supply chain industry increased. Throughout her studies she has continued working a full-time job, starting a family, and moving across the country. Currently, she is working as the Operational Sales Lead for Bimbo Bakeries USA. The distribution and production company allows Sarah to focus on food waste management for over 150 people and 31 facilities.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Discussion Guide

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us and answer our questions. This call will be recorded for auto-transcription purposes. The recording will be deleted after the completion of this project.
Please indicate if you prefer your name, company, and position withheld from our project.

(No-continue on with questions.)
(Yes-Certainly. We will redact any personal information from our transcription.)

Introductions

1. Group/interviewer introductions. (*Name/location/job.)*
2. *(Briefly discuss the purpose of the project.)*
3. Please introduce yourself and explain your role.

Recycling

4. What steps toward recycling have you taken in your role? What about the steps the company has taken? (if applicable)
    a. (if needed for prompting) Are there efforts to increase recycling through marketing?
5. Have you ever heard of Colorado's Producer Responsibility Program? Do you think this is possible given the current infrastructure that is in place?
6. Do you think compostable packaging recycling can be accomplished with current facilities and partnerships?

Producers

7. What are your thoughts surrounding large and small producers that will be affected by this new legislation?
8. Can you explain how food consumed in Colorado may be impacted if the packaging and labeling were to change toward compostable.

Consumers

9. What ideas do you or your organization have about expanding to the Western Slope, southern and eastern Colorado?
10. What support or resources would help you to contribute to the success of the policy?

Conclusion

11. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us today

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