



Highlights of [GAO-07-37](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

Although recycling can generate environmental and economic benefits, the national recycling rate has increased only slightly since 2000, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). While local governments have the primary role in operating recycling programs, EPA and the Department of Commerce (Commerce) have some legal responsibilities for encouraging recycling. GAO was asked to (1) identify key practices cities are using to increase recycling, (2) describe what EPA and Commerce are doing to encourage recycling, and (3) identify federal policy options that could help increase recycling. GAO interviewed recycling coordinators in 11 large cities about key practices and 13 additional recycling stakeholders about policy options. GAO selected both groups based on geographic representation and recycling expertise, among other factors.

What GAO Recommends

To better evaluate the impact of EPA's recycling programs, GAO recommends that EPA establish performance measures and gather performance data on those measures. GAO also recommends that Commerce develop and implement a strategy to help stimulate the development of markets for recycled materials in the United States. In commenting on the draft report, EPA agreed with the recommendation and Commerce did not directly address the recommendation.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-37.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact John B. Stephenson, (202) 512-3841, stephensonj@gao.gov.

RECYCLING

Additional Efforts Could Increase Municipal Recycling

What GAO Found

Recycling coordinators with whom we spoke in selected cities across the country identified several key practices they are using to increase recycling in their cities. The three practices they cited most frequently were (1) making recycling convenient and easy for their residents, (2) offering financial incentives for recycling, such as allowing residents who produce less waste through recycling to use smaller garbage cans and pay lower fees, and (3) conducting public education and outreach. In addition, both recycling coordinators and the recycling literature identified other ways to increase recycling, such as targeting a wide range of materials for recycling and extending recycling programs to the commercial sector.

As a part of its Resource Conservation Challenge strategy, EPA operates several national and regional programs that are designed to increase recycling and help EPA achieve its national municipal solid waste recycling goal of 35 percent by 2008. One of EPA's principal national recycling programs, WasteWise, creates voluntary partnerships with groups, such as universities, states, and businesses, to help them increase their recycling. EPA also provides competitive grants to support projects designed to increase recycling. The impact of EPA's programs is unknown, however, because the programs lack performance measures and comprehensive data on program performance. Although Commerce is required under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act to stimulate the development of markets for recycled materials, the agency is not currently taking any actions to do so in the United States. For example, Commerce is not identifying the location of markets for recycled materials, identifying economic and technical barriers to recycling, or encouraging the development of new uses for recycled materials in the United States. However, agency officials told GAO that Commerce supports increased international trade in recycled and recyclable materials as part of its general trade promotion responsibilities.

The recycling stakeholders we interviewed identified various federal policy options that they believe could help municipalities increase their recycling rates. The three federal policy options cited most frequently were to (1) establish a nationwide campaign to educate the public about recycling, (2) enact a national "bottle bill" in which beverage containers may be returned for money, and (3) require manufacturers to establish systems that consumers can use to recycle their products. Other identified policy options included facilitating the sharing of recycling best practices among municipalities, expanding EPA research on the economic and environmental benefits of recycling, and providing additional grant money for recycling projects.