



***Federal Programs for the Circular Economy:  
State and Local Perspectives on Efforts to Improve Reuse and Recycling***

**Written Testimony of Susan Fife-Ferris, Seattle Public Utilities, City of Seattle**

**U.S. Senate Environment & Public Works Committee**

**Washington, DC, May 22, 2024**

Good morning, Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Committee.

My name is Susan Fife-Ferris, and I am Director of Solid Waste Planning & Program Management for Seattle Public Utilities, City of Seattle. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

Seattle has been an international leader in solid waste management for decades, including waste prevention, recycling, and composting of organic materials. Our vision is zero waste. We owe our success to strong public and private support that has resulted in thoughtful planning and policies and dedicated and sufficient program resources focused on protecting and improving community and environmental health.

Seattle understands not everywhere has this type of support; however, we know there are actions that can be taken by every community.

However, our city still faces challenges and has limited control or influence over the large and complex solid waste system. This is why leadership at the national level for both recyclables and organic materials is so important to help eliminate waste and create a truly circular economy.

***Need Continued and Expanded Federal Grant Funding***

Funding for the Solid Waste Infrastructure for Recycling (or SWIFR) grant program included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act has been critical for important reuse and recycling strategies and projects throughout our nation.

Seattle is the fortunate recipient of one of these SWIFR grants, which will allow us to establish a Salvaged Lumber Warehouse to support our local deconstruction sector in salvaging lumber that can be reclaimed and reused from old buildings.

The SWIFR Grant will provide the seed money necessary to attract a private company to site a salvaged lumber warehouse in our area to ensure that recovered lumber can be stored, marketed, and sold. This partnership with the federal government and with the private sector will help us fill a critical gap in the infrastructure and lay the foundation for sustained preservation of the precious resource that this lumber represents – the bounty from our region's old growth forests.

This is just one example of how federal grants can be used to support a circular economy.

We strongly encourage the Senate to extend the SWIFR funding as well as the other funding mechanisms, such as the Consumer Recycling Education and Outreach grant program, beyond 2026.

### ***Need Nation-wide Data Collection and Analysis***

The federal government can also play a critical role by supporting consistent and accurate data collection at the national level and using this data to drive effective planning, policy, programs, and investments in the solid waste field.

Seattle has collected and used data to inform our management of solid waste for over thirty years, and we know how important and foundational it is. As an example, we use waste characterization studies to understand what is in our various waste streams. We collect data down to the specific material type and use that information to inform our decisions on what to target, such as food waste and single-use packaging, and the strategies to use, such as developing standards, offering incentives, and/or rolling out new programs. Data tells a story and helps us see what is working and what isn't over time.

For this reason, we urge Congress to pass Chairman Carper's bill, S. 1194 – Recycling and Composting Accountability Act, as a great start at providing the support needed for data collection and analysis nation-wide.

### ***Need Recycling Infrastructure and Accessibility Support***

In addition, Seattle strongly supports Ranking Member Capito in her sponsorship of S. 1189 – Recycling Infrastructure and Accessibility Act, which would also be an important step forward to help increase collection of recyclables by making recycling more convenient and accessible. Many communities throughout the country don't have access to basic recycling, resulting in valuable materials going to landfill. We urge Congress to pass this legislation.

### ***Need Standards and Funding to Expanded Opportunities for Reuse***

Seattle's Reuse Seattle initiative is an example of where a government entity can play a role in developing a circular economy and facilitating the reduction and eventual elimination of single-use plastic products and packaging in the food service industry.

Seattle is working through three channels for action:

1. *Promoting Bring Your Own Cup (BYOC)*, where customers are encouraged to bring their own cup or mug to their favorite coffee shop or cafe.
2. *Promoting and facilitating durables and reusables for dine-in*, where single-use disposable food and beverage containers are replaced with durable or reusables when in-shop dining is an option.
3. *Fostering and enabling an integrated reuse system*, where the city is working in partnership with vendors and businesses across Seattle to create the blueprint for scalable and affordable reuse options.

This is not a government run program – but a program where Seattle creates the conditions for Reuse Solutions to flourish by:

- *Recruiting partners*, such as music venues, stadiums, and educational institutions.
- *Making connections*, by bringing stakeholders together to discuss logistics and possibilities.
- *Offering incentives* of up to \$500 in dishware to supporting businesses as they move from single-use to reuse.



- *Establishing standards* for reusable containers and cups to ensure they meet the needs of the businesses and customers.
- *Coordinating systems* to ensure that the reusable containers and cups can be used, dropped in a convenient collection location, transported, washed, redistributed, and reused.
- *Promoting a reuse culture*, through education, information, and collaboration.

We envision a network of reuse systems for food and beverage containers at Seattle institutions, venues, businesses, and communities. By creating systems of collection, transportation, washing, and digital infrastructures, Seattle is working to making reuse convenient and accessible across our city. Our goal is that the private and non-profit sector will embrace and operate the various elements of a reuse system, creating new green jobs. Additional information can be found at [www.ReuseSeattle.org](http://www.ReuseSeattle.org).

The federal government can play a role by supporting the development of standards and providing local governments funds to invest in reuse systems and infrastructure. Federal investments can provide the seeds that help grow the reuse ecosystem.

### ***Need Federal Action to Prevent Food Waste from Going to Landfill***

Composting of organic materials, such as food and yard waste, imitates the natural processes of decay and regeneration and results in a beneficial soil amendment. If landfilled, these organic materials produce large amounts of methane as they decompose, which is a powerful greenhouse gas. Currently, approximately 40% of food in the United States goes uneaten, and so Seattle has identified food waste as a top priority for prevention and diversion to either rescue or composting.

Examples of Seattle's efforts include:

- *Love Food, Stop Waste* program, which provides consumers with information and tools to help reduce food waste at home. Additional information is available at [Stop Food Waste - Utilities | seattle.gov](http://StopFoodWaste-Utilities|seattle.gov)
- *Pacific Coast Food Waste Commitment*, where Seattle, as a participating signatory, is collaborating with food businesses such as grocery retailers and manufacturers to reduce food going to landfill across the West Coast by 50% by 2030.
- *Food Rescue* program, where Seattle is partnering with businesses and nonprofits to improve how edible, unsold food gets donated to those that need it in Seattle and diverted from both the organics and landfill streams. Additional information is available at [Food Donation - Utilities | seattle.gov](http://FoodDonation-Utilities|seattle.gov)

In addition, Seattle recently established a Food Rescue Innovation Grant program to help improve the distribution of edible, unsold food to feed people while reducing food going to waste. This is one critical way of helping people have enough to eat while keeping valuable food out of the organics or landfill streams. Our studies have shown that food is the single largest material going to garbage from Seattle businesses and is a significant contributor to greenhouse gases. This grant will provide seed funding to test innovative approaches that could ultimately be scaled or replicated with private sector, nonprofit, or philanthropic funding. Additional information is available at [Food Rescue Innovation - Utilities | seattle.gov](http://FoodRescueInnovation-Utilities|seattle.gov)

The federal government can take action to provide seed funding and tax credits for the investment into innovations and needed infrastructure to prevent food waste upstream and help keep edible food from being wasted and getting into the hands of the food insecure.



## ***Need Federal Support in Other Areas***

Additionally, Seattle supports the federal government:

- Financially incentivizing Waste Prevention, Reuse, Refill, Repair, and Use of Post-consumer Recycled Content, through grants, subsidies, and tax credits.
- Adopting national design for recyclability standards for products and packaging that include standards for use of post-consumer recycled content.
- Reducing subsidies to virgin materials, such as petrochemical feedstocks that directly compete with post-consumer recycled plastics.
- Creating accountability throughout the recycling system by setting mandatory capture rate goals and actions tied to timelines, standardized reporting requirements, and verification of responsible end markets.
- Supporting a national framework for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) for Packaging and Paper Products that holds producers responsible for their products and packaging and ensures they provide adequate, ongoing, and stable financial support for the recycling industry and local communities.
- Supporting whole life cycle analysis of materials that considers externalities, such as plastic residuals impact to marine life.
- Adopting national labeling standards to reduce consumer confusion and support their ability to recycle responsibly.
- Supporting recyclers through incentives and tax credits in the same way the government has supported renewable energy providers. Decades ago, renewable energy was a small fraction of our country's electricity portfolio. Now more money is invested in renewables than in fossil fuel electricity. That same approach will support the recycling industry, especially those recycling plastics.
- Supporting and emphasizing an upstream approach to address the root causes of waste to reduce impacts on health and the environment in future legislation and funding support and throughout EPA's Draft National Strategy to Prevent Plastic Pollution, which supports the United States' shift to a circular approach that is restorative or regenerative by design, enables resources to maintain their highest value for as long as possible, and aims to eliminate waste in the management of plastic products.

## **Conclusion**

It is an honor to be able to share with you today how Seattle's vision of a zero waste future builds toward an inclusive and circular economy, where all materials with value are reused or recycled, and nothing is wasted.

We applaud the Senate's efforts to support the United States' shift to a circular approach. As you look to the future, Seattle strongly encourages you to place a greater emphasis



upstream on waste prevention and reuse, while also continuing to support increased downstream diversion of recyclables and organics to reliable and responsible markets.

### **Attachments**

1. *Seattle Solid Waste – Let’s Talk Trash! PowerPoint*, prepared for the U.S. Senate Environment & Public Works Committee Testimony of Susan Fife-Ferris on May 22, 2024
2. *Letter to the United States Department of State re: Seattle Public Utilities’ Global Plastics Treaty Input – Critical Concepts to Include*, dated January 2, 2024
3. *Seattle Public Utilities’ Response to Request for Public Comment Docket ID No. EPA–HQ–OLEM–2023–0228, Draft National Strategy to Prevent Plastic Pollution*, dated July 31, 2023
4. *Seattle Public Utilities’ Circular Economy Summary*, from February 2023.

