

Recycling leaders in Georgia have launched an ambitious effort to pull together data on the impact of materials recovery in the state. BY ABBY GOLDSMITH

METRICS ON MY MIND

In 2011, the state of Georgia eliminated the requirement that local governments report on their activity around recycling. Although disposal facilities still report total tons received to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division, local governments provide to the state no information about recycling. Private recycling companies, meanwhile, have never been required to report.

Yet in Georgia and across the nation, measuring the current and potential volumes of recyclable material available for recovery is vital to encourage investment in recycling infrastructure. In 2005, for instance, an effort to quantify the tons and value of recyclables recovered and available for recovery led the state, local governments and the private sector to invest in four single-stream recycling hubs, or transfer points, in locales where infrastructure was lacking.

Georgia recycling advocates recently determined another recycling data collection effort was in order. Annually reported information about recycling allows state and local governments to measure the success of specific policies and programs and to promote and dedicate resources to those that are most successful. In addition, data about what is or could be recovered is a powerful tool to encourage manufacturers that rely on these materials to locate or expand in Georgia.

With no concrete evidence to the contrary, some recent regional and national reports have begun to suggest that recycling and recovery efforts in Georgia are subpar. A presentation by the

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency showed a Georgia statewide recycling rate of 1 percent, with recovery tonnages equal to one-tenth those in other southeastern states including Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina and Tennessee.

How could this be? Georgia, after all, is purported to be home to more end users of recovered materials than any other state in the country except California. In Georgia, 15 paper mills consume a significant amount of recovered fiber as feedstock, and eight of them use recovered fiber exclusively. Also, the state's carpet manufacturers are believed to consume one-third of the plastic beverage containers recovered in North America.

Strength in numbers

The Georgia Recycling Coalition (GRC), which keeps its finger on the pulse of recycling entities across Georgia, knew that the EPA statistics did not accurately depict reality. With grant funds from the Coca-Cola Foundation and technical assistance from A Goldsmith Resources LLC, an Atlanta-based consulting firm focusing on recycling and solid waste management, GRC embarked on a campaign to gather the data to prove the strength of the recycling industry in Georgia.

To determine how best to gather this information on a voluntary basis, GRC convened a meeting of recycling firms and groups in the state, including local governments, processors and end users.

The input received at this meeting, held in March 2014 in conjunction with EPA Region 4 and Re-TRAC Connect, led to three guiding principles for what was dubbed the “Measure Georgia” campaign.

1. Gather data from all types of participants in the recycling industry.

Over half of the materials recycled in Georgia may never go through a local government collection program or a processing facility. Some manufacturers, in fact, have reported that up to 90 percent of the recovered material they receive as feedstock comes directly from generators. Thus, data collected from local governments alone may provide a very limited picture of recycling in Georgia.

To address this concern, the Measure Georgia campaign gathers data separately from three types of participants in the recycling process: local governments, many of which collect data on tons of recyclables collected; processing facilities; and end users of recovered material. Because the same material may be handled by more than one of these stakeholders, the campaign collects tonnage data from each separately using tailored surveys built into Re-TRAC Connect, an online waste diversion tracking and data management system used by many local governments and private companies in North America.

Local governments report program information annually and track tonnage quarterly in the campaign’s Local Government Reporting Program. This initiative is similar to the program that local governments in Georgia previously used when they reported to the state, although the new local government survey is much shorter and more streamlined to encourage voluntary participation. Processing facilities, meanwhile, report tonnages entering their facilities into the MRF Reporting Program. In stakeholder meetings, processors emphasized they would be more willing to report incoming tons than tons sent to market. Thus, an aggregate residue rate is calculated for each type of processing facility based on information reported into the program, and this residue rate is applied to incoming tonnage totals at all facilities to estimate the tons sent to market.

Finally, manufacturers who use recovered materials as feedstock report tonnage quarterly into a third program, the End User Reporting Program. For existing Re-TRAC Connect users, all of the programs can be joined from the Programs area in Re-TRAC Connect.

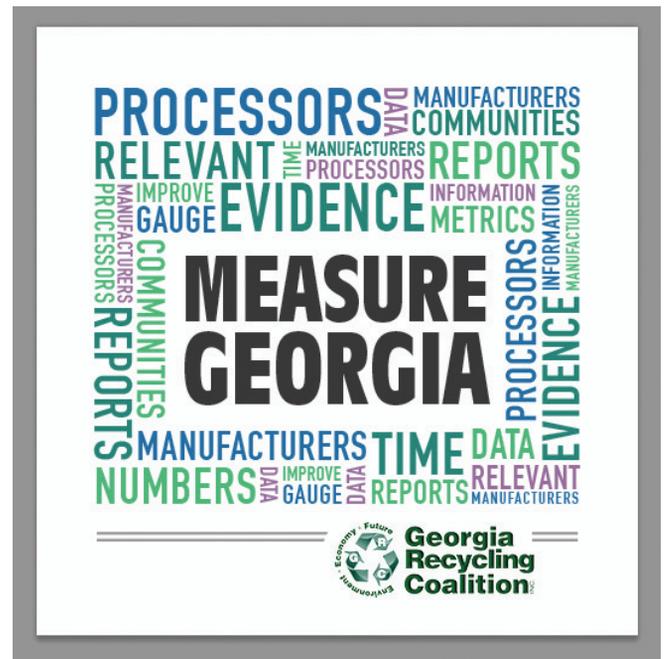
2. Since participation is voluntary, make it attractive to participate.

Participation in the Measure Georgia effort is not required by statute or contract, so the campaign goes to great lengths to encourage participation. One of the greatest barriers to gathering tonnage data from private recycling companies is concern about confidentiality. Because data is reported and managed through an online tool managed by a third party, rather than hosted on government servers, it is easier to limit access to individual facility data. GRC assures participants that individual reports will not be publicly available and that data will only be presented in aggregate.

The data-gathering campaign also uses testimonials to encourage participation. GRC asked early participants to provide quotes (see text box on page 39 for an example) about why they chose to participate, and these quotes have been used on promotional material to recruit those individuals’ peers. In addition, early participants were asked to “challenge” a peer from another organization – the person challenged was then sent the challenge electronically with a link to the campaign materials. Finally, the names of all participants that want to be identified (including all local governments and some private companies) are listed in GRC publications and are projected at conferences and in other public forums.

3. Dovetail Measure Georgia with other initiatives

The campaign is part of a bigger initiative to promote the economic contribution of recycling in Georgia. As part of the corresponding “Made in Georgia (from Recycled Materials)” initiative, the GRC, the Georgia Department of Economic Development and the Georgia Environmental Protection Division have created an online map of processors and end users of recovered materials (along with other members of the solid waste infrastructure). Measure Georgia’s End User Reporting Program allows end users to indicate how and where



The Measure Georgia data collection campaign was launched in 2014 to better quantify the state’s recycling activity and its economic impact.

the products that they manufacture can be purchased. This information is being incorporated into the Made in Georgia maps so that users will see which companies use recovered material in their manufacturing processes as well as where those items are on sale.

Results to date

The campaign’s Local Government Reporting Program went live Nov. 1, 2014, and in the first 100 days, 30 local governments (representing over 40 percent of the state’s population) have pledged and begun to enter data about their programs and tonnages collected. The MRF Reporting Program and the End User Reporting Program went live two weeks later. Dozens of processors/MRFs and end users/manufacturers in the state have pledged to participate and begun to enter information.

Preliminary results confirm that Georgia recycling activity goes far beyond that attributable to local governments, the only entities that have historically been accounted for in this realm. The first three end users that participated in the campaign reportedly accepted five times more recovered material than all the reporting local governments combined. Each of these end users indicated that they received much of their material directly from generators. These end users report that together they employ thousands of Georgians to convert recovered materials to new products.

Next steps

For the next several months, the main focus of the campaign will be correlating program information and quarterly tonnages from the majority of Georgia's largest end users and material processors. The GRC has been working to address the concerns of private companies to elicit participation, and by the end of June 2015, Measure

Georgia administrators anticipate having sufficient information to provide more comprehensive numbers regarding tons recycled and recycling rates. These figures can then be reflected in state, regional and national reports.

It's also important to note the main purpose of Measure Georgia is demonstrating how much the recycling industry



The Made in Georgia initiative helps inform residents which products and manufacturers leverage locally recovered materials.

contributes to Georgia's economy and what certain policies or programs could do to enhance this contribution. To do this, project leaders will match business-specific economic factors from recent regional and national studies – such as the number of jobs created for every ton of material processed at a single-stream processing facility – with the tonnages reported into Measure Georgia.

GRC, the Georgia Department of Economic Development and the Georgia Environmental Protection Division will then be able to use these powerful statistics to help support and expand the state's recycling infrastructure. **RR**

Abby Goldsmith, principal at A Goldsmith Resources LLC, has advised state and local governments on sustainable approaches to recovering resources from solid waste for the past 25 years. She can be contacted at abby@agoldsmithresources.com.

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"In today's world, businesses are concerned with issues like zero waste and sustainability. Having the tools to quantify our recycling efforts will help us attract new industries to Georgia and possibly our local communities. We are proud to be part of this effort and look forward to seeing how we 'measure up.'"

Michael Snipes, solid waste director, Laurens County Solid Waste Management Authority

Recycling Makes a Difference in Georgia

Recycling is good for the environment and good for Georgia's economy

MORE than 120 Georgia businesses use recovered materials to manufacture a variety of new consumer products. These businesses rely on items such as plastic bottles, metals, glass, paper, organics, carpet, and tires collected from residential and commercial recycling programs to use as raw materials in their process. And, they are only a part of the recycling industry as "end users", employing thousands of Georgians.

- Paper mills use 40% less energy to make paper from recycled paper than they do making paper from virgin timber. (Dept of Energy)
- A ton of paper made from recycled fibers conserves 7,000 gallons of water (DOE)

Georgia has strong markets for recyclables

Georgia is well known in the nation for its plentiful markets for recovered materials. Our state is considered to have one of the largest infrastructures in the nation for recovery and end use of recyclables.

- Georgia's Paper Industry: Recycles almost 8% of all the paper consumed in the United States and there are fifteen (15) paper mills in Georgia using recycled content, eight (8) relying exclusively on recycled fiber.
- Plastic Beverage Containers (#1 PET plastic): 1/3rd of all plastic beverage containers recycled in North America get recycled in Georgia – turned into carpet (mainly in Northwest Georgia).
- Aluminum Recycling: Novelis, one of the largest aluminum recyclers in the world, processes used beverage cans in Greensboro, GA with its North American headquarters in Atlanta.
- Glass Recycling: Three manufacturers in Georgia use recycled glass to make new glass products.

Individual action DOES make a difference

Did you know that recycling can save enough energy to offset the energy you consume to light a room, run a computer, and watch TV? It can even offset the water you use in your shower!

- Recycling 1 glass bottle will save enough energy to light a 100-watt light bulb for four hours.
- Recycling 1 aluminum can will run a computer for three hours.
- Recycling 1 plastic soft drink bottle will save enough energy to run a TV for 1.5 hours.
- Recycling 5 pounds of paper will conserve enough water to "offset" the water used in a typical shower.



**Georgia
Recycling
Coalition** INC.

The Georgia Recycling Coalition (GRC) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Our mission is to compliment and coordinate activities relative to recycling, to foster communications among professionals, organizations, government agencies and individuals, and to promote and enhance reduction and recycling programs throughout the state.

Need local recycling information?

- Georgia Recycling Coalition – www.georgiarecycles.org
- Keep Georgia Beautiful – www.keepgeorgiab beautiful.org

Find the Georgia Recycling Coalition here as well:

