



Recycling Reform Act Update

RRA Advisory Council Meeting

February 5, 2026



Presentation Overview

- Introduction
- Model Study Overview
- Engagement Overview
- Update on Statewide Lists and Needs Assessment
- Advisory Council Support
- Questions and Discussion



Introduction

Introduction

- The Recycling Reform Act (RRA) directs Ecology to study how a statewide recycling refunds program (a.k.a. bottle bill, or deposit return system) could work in the state
 - Recycling refunds programs place a refundable deposit on certain beverage containers at purchase
 - Consumers receive their deposit back when empty containers are returned at dedicated locations for recycling
 - Program goals are typically to increase recycling rates, reduce litter, and make recycling convenient and accessible
- Modeling and engagement must prioritize equity and convenience
- Ecology contracted with Eastern Research Group, which brings a full team of experts, to complete this work



The Recycling Refund Studies Team



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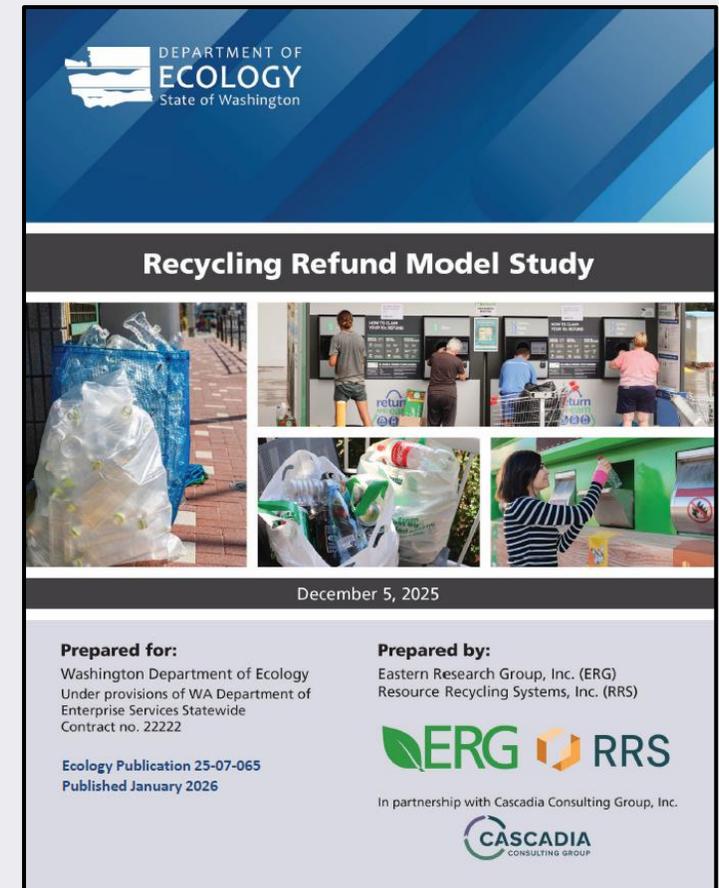
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Phase One: Model Study - August 2025 - January 2026

- Focuses on understanding how a recycling refunds system could be implemented within Washington
 - A central element is the “redemption site network,” or the locations where people return containers
- ERG Team conducted detailed modeling in King County, Spokane County, and Yakima County
- Ecology submitted model study results and preliminary recommendations to the Legislature **January 7, 2026**



Phase Two: Engagement Study - Currently Underway

- Engagement plan focuses on communities and other groups within the three modeled counties, supplemented by statewide input (e.g., through a survey)
- Ecology will lead formal Tribal Government-to-Government Consultation and engagement with Tribes
- Findings from the engagement study will inform the final recommendations included in the engagement report due to the Legislature **January 1, 2027**





Model Study

Model Study Overview

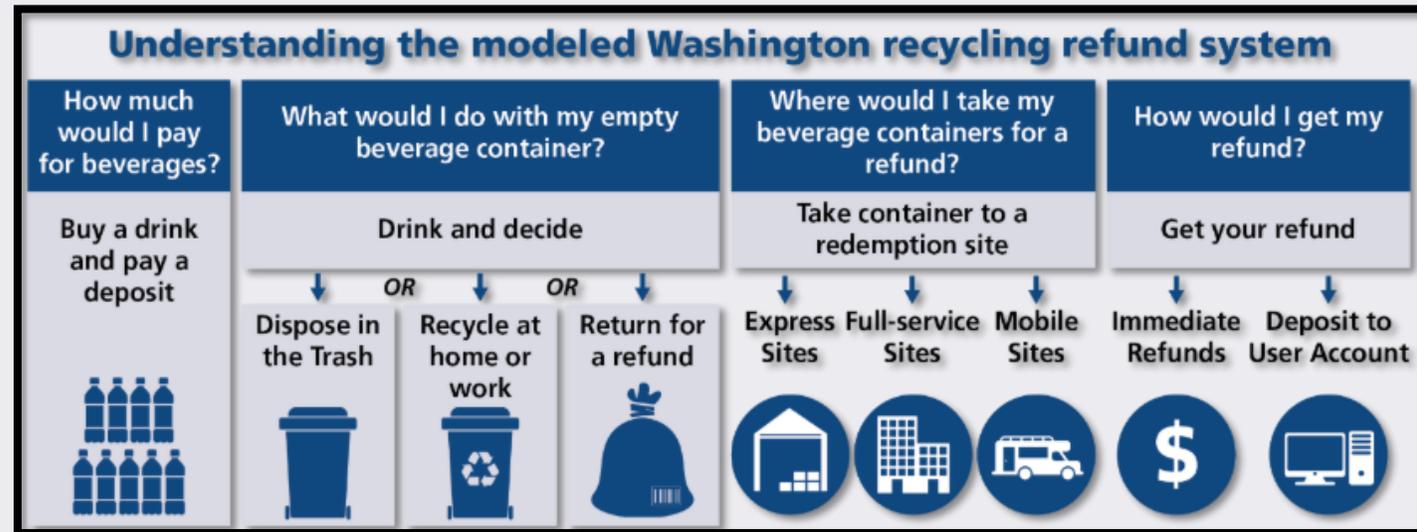
- Technical study focused on understanding what a recycling refunds system could look like in WA. It models:
 - How the system might operate
 - How many sites would be needed
 - Where sites should be located
 - How the program could support equity and convenience for all residents
- Ecology selected three counties (representing urban, suburban & rural) for modeling: King, Spokane and Yakima
- Learning from these counties help the study estimate how a larger, statewide system might function

Modeled Counties



What is a Recycling Refund System?

- Recycling refunds programs place a refundable deposit on certain beverage containers at purchase
- Consumers receive their deposit back when empty containers are returned at dedicated locations for recycling
- Redemption Site Network: a dedicated network of locations where consumers can return their beverage containers for a refund on the deposit they paid at the time of purchase



Modeling Analysis

- Study goal: model what convenient access to redemption sites could look like across all three counties
 - Distance to retail used as a comparative measure of convenience
- Key assumptions used in modeled scenarios:
 - An average of 700 beverage containers purchased per year per person
 - Travel distances to redemption sites should be similar to distance to retail
 - A redemption target of 80% or 560 beverage containers per person per year
 - Set distances to redemption sites at 0.25 miles from public transit stops and walking in dense urban areas
 - A variety of site types and redemption methods to collect and process containers
 - Immediate refund opportunities at sites near overburdened communities

Modeled Scenarios

- Four scenarios were modeled by adjusting system criteria
 - Base model (Scenario 1): redemption services as convenient as the closest retailer where beverages can be purchased
 - Scenario 2: consolidated closely located redemption sites to reduce redundancy
 - Scenario 3: further adjusted average drive time to the retailer for urban and suburban populations
 - Scenario 4: same as scenario 3, but adds improved services for rural and overburdened populations (additional express sites)
- Modeled scenarios evaluated for site capacity, convenience, and equity
- Criteria included drive-time to redemption site, access via public transportation, opportunities for combined trips, and ability to immediately redeem container deposits

Modeled Study Scenario Results

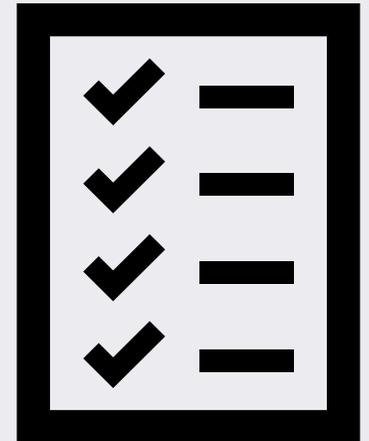
- **Scenario 4** offered best balance of convenience across urban and rural areas with capacity to process 80% of estimated volume of containers
- Full ERG report contains maps, details on data, base model, additional scenarios, and evaluation process

Number and type of redemption sites modeled in Scenario 4 extrapolated state-wide

Number of full-service sites	47
Number of express flex sites	408
Number of express drop sites	231
Total number of sites	685

Preliminary Recommendations

- **Convenience**
 - Clearly define “convenience” using measurable factors such as driving time or travel distance
- **Site placement & management**
 - Consider community needs and population differences when choosing site types and locations
- **Ensuring equity**
 - Establish an equity plan that ensures overburdened and isolated communities have access to immediate refunds and full-service sites have appropriate safety and security measures
- **Planning, reporting, & accountability**
 - Commit to ongoing planning, monitoring, and reporting to ensure the system continues to meet goals
 - Track key performance indicators, such as the number of containers returned and how many people use the system



Next Steps

- Phase II – Engagement Study
 - Ecology and the ERG team will refine these recommendations through a broad engagement process
 - Visuals from the model study will be used to support engagement
- Ecology anticipates updating and refining modeled scenario(s) and preliminary recommendations in the final engagement report



Engagement Plan Overview

Purpose of the Engagement Plan

- RRA directs Ecology to evaluate a statewide recycling refunds program
- A successful recycling refunds program will depend on:
 - Convenient access
 - Equitable participation
 - Community trust
- The engagement plan outlines the process to help ensure Ecology's final legislative recommendations are:
 - Grounded in lived experience
 - Reflective of community needs
 - Responsive to Washington's diverse geographies
 - Practically implementable



**A full-service site in Oregon, USA.
Credit: Oregon Beverage Recycling
Cooperative**

Building on Prior Efforts and Studies



Ecology's Model Study

- Redemption site locations and types
- Travel distance and transportation barriers
- Equity impacts across community types



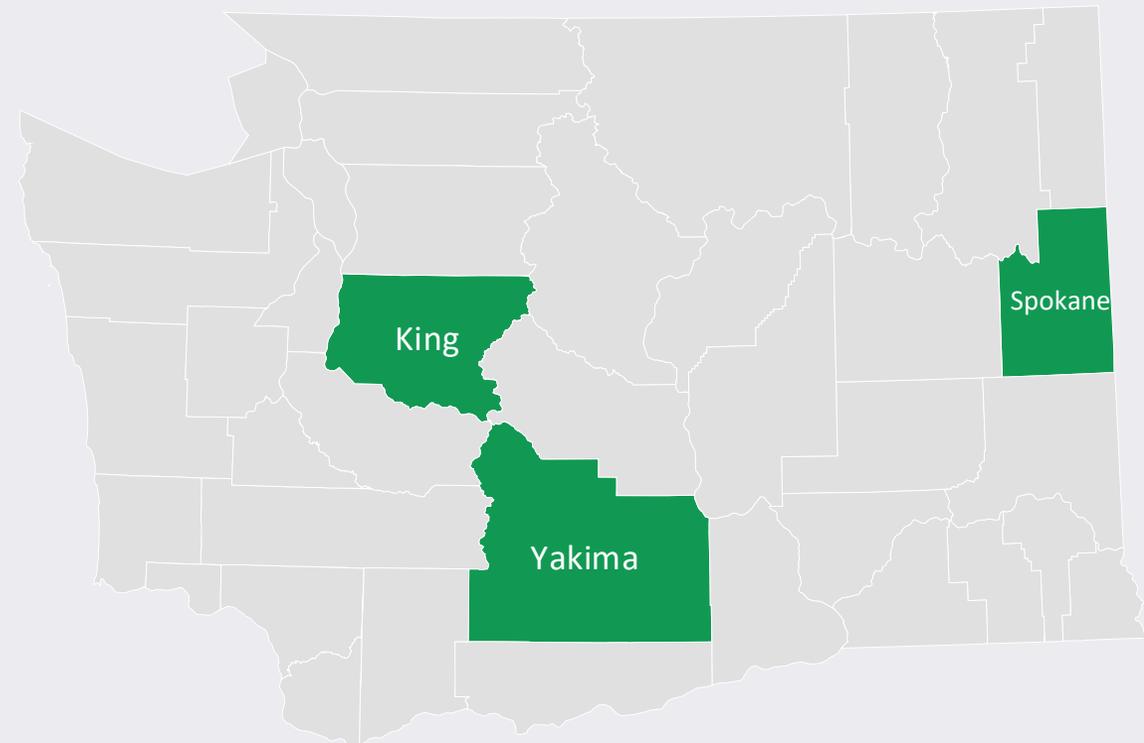
Lessons learned from

- Existing deposit return systems and programs nationwide (OR, ME, CT, MA, VT)
- International systems
- Prior Washington recycling and packaging studies

Where Ecology's Engagement is Focused

- RRA directed engagement to take place within the same counties modeled in Phase I (King, Spokane, Yakima)
- County-level engagement will be supplemented by statewide perspectives using a survey tailored for each audience/recipient
- Ecology is leading formal Tribal Government-to-Government Consultation and engagement

Modeled Counties



Engagement Goals

Through engagement, Ecology seeks to:

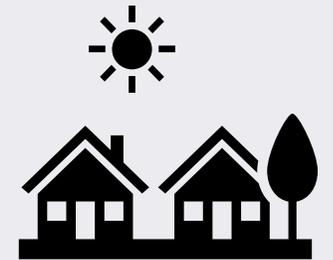
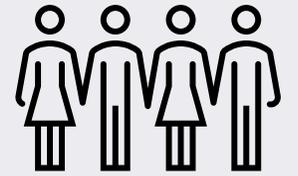
- Understand **community-defined convenience**
- Identify barriers related to:
 - Transportation
 - Time and mobility
 - Housing type and location
- Gather operational input on:
 - Infrastructure needs
 - Redemption site locations, permitting
 - System feasibility
- Ensure final legislative recommendations reflect **equity and access**, in addition to modeled outcomes



Express drop site in New South Wales, Australia

Who we are Engaging

- Community Connector partners
 - Duwamish Valley Sustainability Association (King County)
 - Latino Community Fund (Yakima County)
 - Nuestras Raices (Spokane County)
- Community members and residents, including those who reside in overburdened communities as defined by the RRA
- County and local governments
- Recycling system operators (haulers, MRFs, processors, potential redemption site operators)
- Producers and beverage retailers



Engagement Approach

A layered, complementary approach with equity embedded throughout:

- Focus on overburdened, low-income, rural, and remote communities
- Compensation for community participants and partners
- Plain-language, accessible, multilingual materials
- Ecology-led Tribal consultation and engagement:
 - Respect for sovereignty as participation in any future recycling refunds program would be voluntary

Engagement Tactics

Community Connector partnerships

Community events and “go to you” meetings

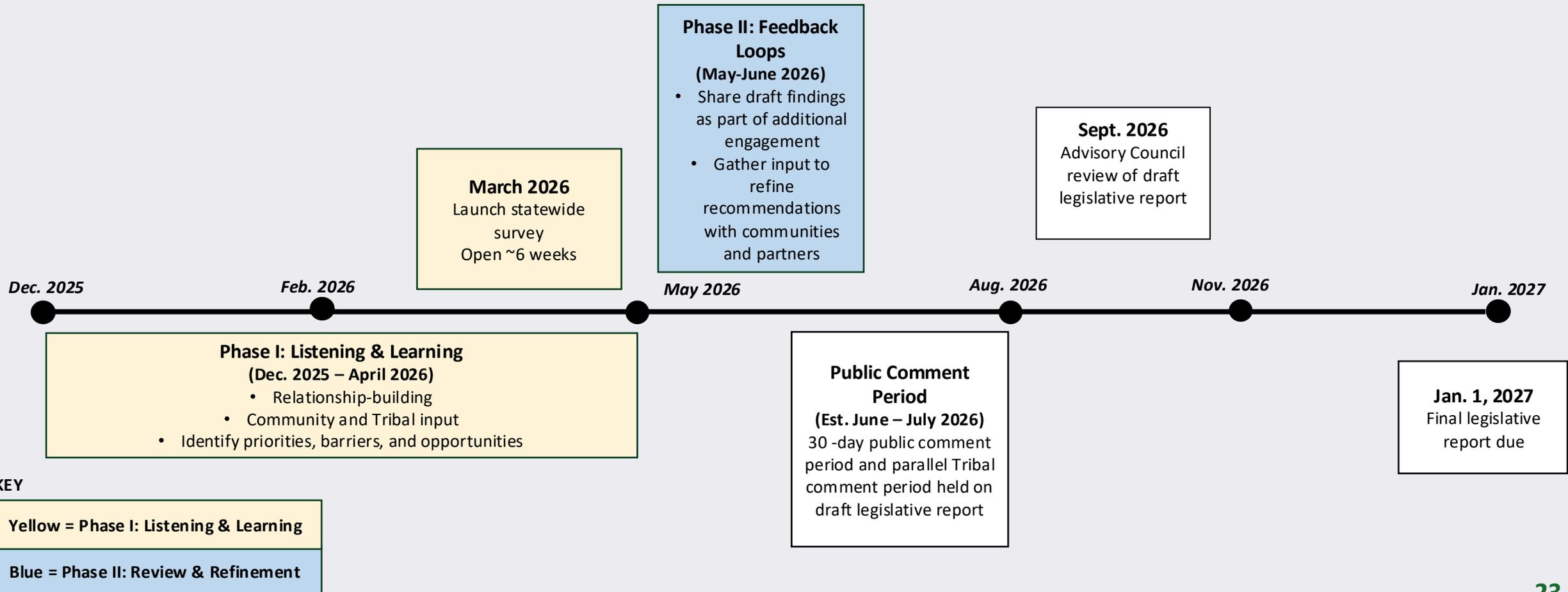
In-person and virtual feedback sessions

1:1 and small-group interviews

Government-to-Government Tribal consultation led by Ecology

Statewide survey (role-specific modules) to complement county-level engagement

Project Timeline - Engagement Study





Statewide Lists and Needs Assessments

ERG The Statewide Lists/Needs Assessment Team



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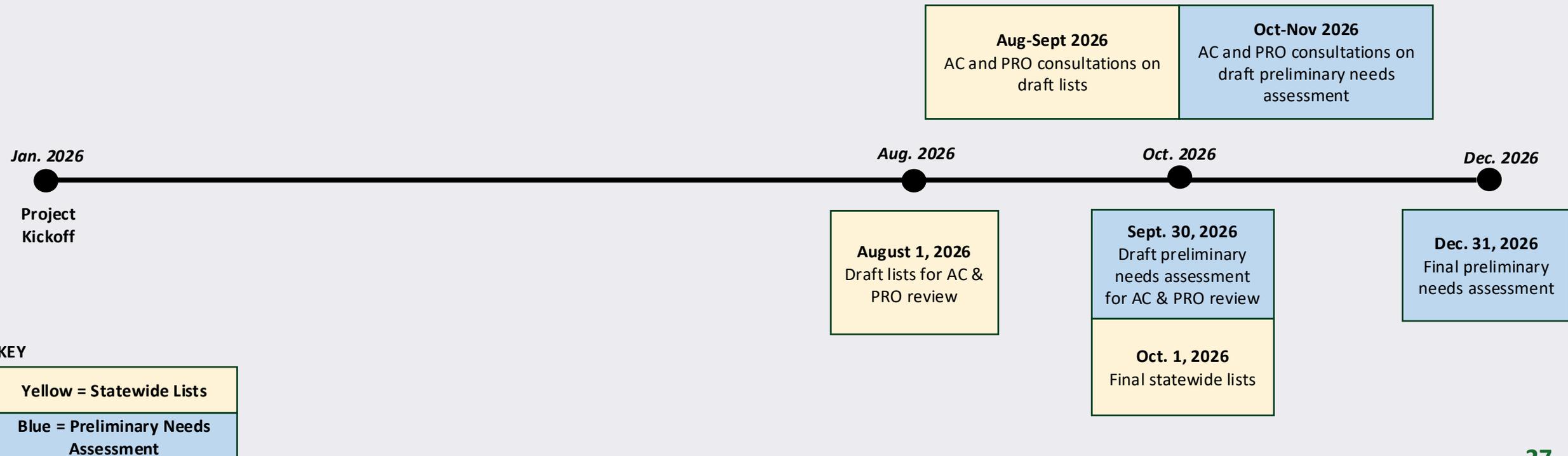


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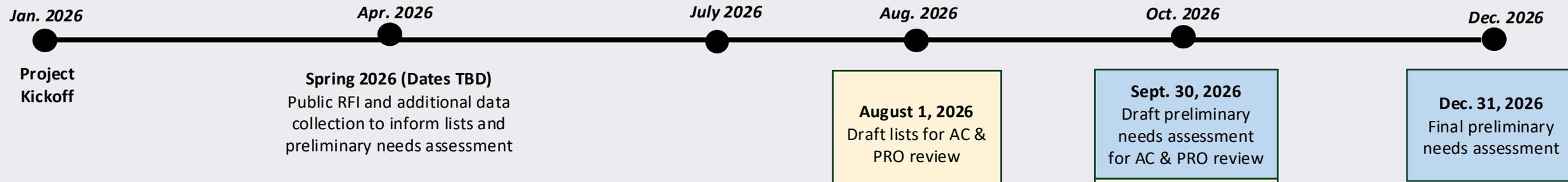
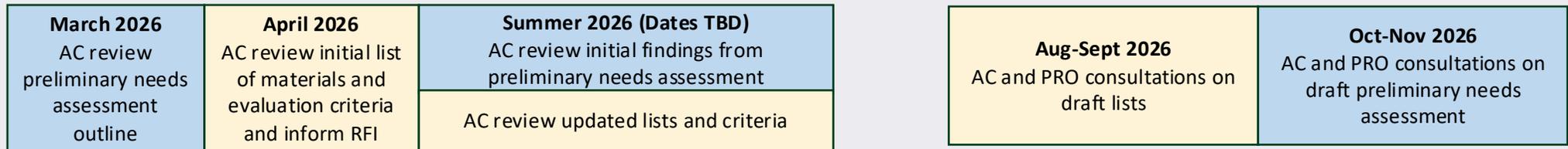
Project Overview and Goals

- **Mandate from Recycling Reform Act:**
 - Create at least **four lists of recyclable and compostable materials** to be collected statewide (2026)
 - Conduct **preliminary needs assessment** identifying current recycling service levels, facility processing capacity, service contract lengths and costs, current markets, and amount of material introduced into the state (2026)
 - Conduct **full needs assessment** that comprehensively evaluates current system performance and infrastructure, material flows and outcomes, market viability, environmental and public health impacts, and program design options, and provides recommendations for improvements, investments, performance targets, metrics, and methods to support continuous progress (2026-2027)
- **Additional team goals:**
 - Meet the legislative mandates on time
 - Use as much state and local data as possible
 - Develop defensive methodologies and be as transparent as possible about the processes
 - Engage with Advisory Council and PRO early for input on methodologies, data sources, and initial findings

Project Timeline - 2026 Statutory Deadlines



Project Timeline - Opportunities for Earlier Input



KEY

Yellow = Statewide Lists
Blue = Preliminary Needs Assessment

How can the Advisory Council support these projects?

- Recycling Refund Studies
 - Participate in engagement activities (e.g. insight interviews, in-person feedback sessions, other events) (March – April 2026)
 - Distribute engagement survey to your networks and (March – April 2026)
 - Review and provide input on draft legislative recommendations and final report (June/July 2026 Public comment period; Advisory Council formal review September 2026)
- Statewide Lists and Needs Assessments
 - Ecology is exploring options for the Advisory Council and/or a potential subcommittee to provide early input on the lists and preliminary needs assessment to ensure sound methodology and appropriate data sources (Spring – Summer 2026)
 - Participate in Request for Information and other data collection/engagement activities (Spring 2026)
 - Official consultations on drafts of the lists and preliminary needs assessment (August – December 2026)



Thank you!

Questions and Discussion