



Washington Recycling Refunds Study Draft Engagement Report Recycling Reform Act Equity Subcommittee

June 29, 2026



Background and Legislative Direction

The Recycling Reform Act directed Ecology to:

- Evaluate the potential for a recycling refunds program in Washington
- Conduct a technical Model Study
- Conduct a statewide Community Engagement Study
- Use both studies to inform future legislative recommendations



What is a Recycling Refunds Program?





What was the Model Study?

- Focused 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**



Recycling Refund Model Study



December 5, 2025

Prepared for:

Washington Department of Ecology
Under provisions of WA Department of
Enterprise Services Statewide
Contract no. 22222

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Prepared by:

Eastern Research Group, Inc. (ERG)
Resource Recycling Systems, Inc. (RRS)

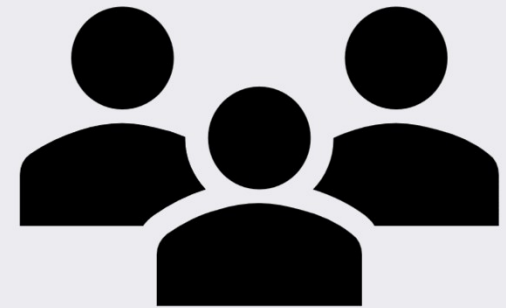


In partnership with Cascadia Consulting Group, Inc.



Purpose of the Engagement Study

- The Engagement Study evaluated whether the Model Study assumptions aligned with community perspectives.
- Specifically, it explored topics such as:
 - Convenience
 - Accessibility
 - Equity
 - Benefits and Barriers to Participation
 - Governance (should a program be implemented)
 - Implementation considerations



Phase I Engagement Summary

December 2025 – May 31, 2026

*Multiple engagement methods. Statewide participation.
Broad community and interest holder perspectives.*



2,742

Total Engagement Touchpoints
Across all engagement activities
(2,616 survey + 62 interviews + 56 community connector participants + 8 Tribal survey)

STATEWIDE SURVEY



2,616

Survey Responses

Residents and interest holders from across Washington

INTERVIEWS



62

Participants

15 interviews across local governments, community organizations, retailer, producers, recycling system operators, and other interested parties.

COMMUNITY CONNECTOR ENGAGEMENT



56

Participants

Engagement through trusted community-based organizations in King, Yakima, and Spokane Counties

TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT



8

Survey Responses

Tribal governments, organizations, businesses, and community members

WHO PROVIDED INPUT

- Residents
- Local Governments
- Community-Based Organizations
- Retailers & Commercial Property Owners
- Producers & Beverage Industry Representatives
- Collectors, Haulers & Recyclers
- Tribal Governments & Community Members

GEOGRAPHIC REACH

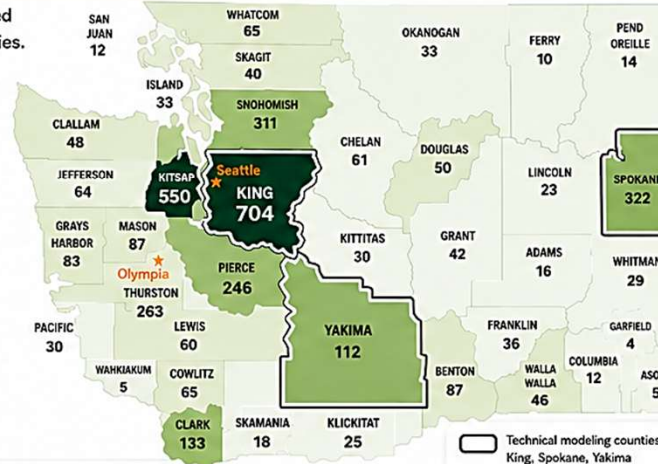
2,616 survey responses received from all 39 Washington counties.

Participation was strongest in King, Spokane, Yakima, Pierce, Kitsap, Clark, and Thurston Counties, with responses received from urban, suburban, rural, and remote communities across the state.

Survey Respondents by County

- 500 or more
- 200 – 499
- 100 – 199
- 50 – 99
- 20 – 49
- Fewer than 20

Total Respondents: 2,616



EQUITY-FOCUSED ENGAGEMENT

- Survey recruitment prioritized communities with higher CDC Social Vulnerability Index scores.
- Community connector partnerships in King, Yakima, and Spokane Counties.
- Spanish-language and bilingual engagement opportunities.
- Responses from communities across a wide range of income levels and geographic settings.



KEY DESIGN PRINCIPLE: Findings are based on multiple engagement methods to understand both **statewide patterns** and **community- and interest-holder-specific perspectives.**

*Total engagement touchpoints include survey respondents, interview participants, community connector participants, and Tribal survey responses. Some individuals may have participated in more than one engagement activity.



Equity-Centered Engagement Overview

We designed the engagement study to reduce barriers to participation by:

- Using multiple engagement methods
- Partnering with trusted Community Connectors to prioritize outreach to underserved, socially vulnerable communities
- Providing multilingual outreach and translated materials
- Designing survey and interview questions around accessibility, convenience, and community context
- Conducting Tribal engagement alongside broader public engagement



Community Connector Partner Engagement Summary

Community Connector Partner	Location	Participants	Engagement Format
Duwamish Valley Sustainability Association (DVSA)	King County	27	Community event conducted primarily in Spanish
Latino Community Fund (LCF)	Yakima County	20	Hybrid (in-person and online) discussion activity
Nuestras Raíces	Spokane County	9	Community discussion activity
Total		56 Participants	



Multi-Lingual Outreach

- Survey Available in 6 languages
- Flyers translated into Spanish
- CBO partner meetings conducted in Spanish
- Planned interpretation support during public comment period
- Informational sessions



Comparta su opinión: Encuesta sobre el sistema de reembolsos por reciclaje

El Departamento de Ecología del Estado de Washington desea conocer su opinión sobre lo que podría hacer que un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje sea más conveniente en su comunidad.

¿Qué es un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje?

Un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje consiste en que las personas pagan un depósito al comprar determinadas bebidas y luego reciben ese depósito de vuelta cuando devuelven el envase vacío para su reciclaje. En algunos estados y países, estos programas han ayudado a aumentar el reciclaje y reducir la basura.

¿Quién debe participar?

El Departamento de Ecología invita a participar a:

- Residentes y miembros de la comunidad
- Miembros de comunidades tribales y gobiernos tribales
- Organizaciones comunitarias
- Ciudades, municipios y condados
- Comerciantes y productores de bebidas
- Operadores de sistemas de reciclaje

Las preguntas de la encuesta variarán según su perfil.

¿Por qué es importante su opinión?

Sus respuestas ayudarán al Departamento de Ecología a comprender cómo reciclan las personas, qué dificultades encuentran y qué haría que un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje fuera accesible y fácil de usar. Esta información ayudará a dar forma a futuros planes para un posible programa de reembolsos por reciclaje en el Estado de Washington.



¡Participe en la encuesta!

- La encuesta se abre el 10 de abril
- **La encuesta se cierra el 22 de mayo**
- Duración aproximada: 10-20 minutos



Escanee el código QR o visite:
WA-Recycling-Refunds.com

Para consultas, contacte al:
564-999-0555 | recyclingreform@ecy.wa.gov



Comprendiendo un posible programa de reembolsos por reciclaje

Información de referencia para residentes del Estado de Washington

El Departamento de Ecología del Estado de Washington está estudiando si un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje (también denominado "ley de envases" o sistema de depósito y retorno) podría ayudar a mejorar el reciclaje, la basura y facilitar que las personas devuelvan botellas y latas en el Estado de Washington. Un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje generalmente significa que las personas pagan un pequeño depósito al comprar ciertas bebidas y reciben ese dinero de vuelta al devolver los envases vacíos para su reciclaje.

El Departamento de Ecología también realizó un estudio de modelado para estimar dónde podrían ubicarse los puntos de devolución y cómo la distancia de viaje, los patrones de población y los tipos de servicio podrían afectar el acceso. Entre los posibles puntos de devolución se incluyen lugares como supermercados o centros comerciales, centros de transporte, instalaciones comunitarias u otros lugares que las personas ya visitan como parte de sus rutinas diarias.

Dependiendo de las necesidades únicas de las comunidades, pueden requerirse diferentes tipos de opciones de devolución. Actualmente, el Departamento de Ecología está conversando con residentes de todo el Estado de Washington para conocer qué sería más conveniente para sus comunidades. Esta información ayudará a dar forma las recomendaciones para el poder legislativo estatal antes de enero de 2027.

Por qué es importante su perspectiva

Los residentes experimentan el reciclaje y la devolución de envases en su vida diaria. La forma en que usted se desplaza, realizan compras, viajan y reciclan puede ayudar al Departamento de Ecología a entender qué es conveniente en la práctica, no solo en un estudio.

Temas que estamos tratando con los miembros de la comunidad

- Qué hace actualmente con las botellas y latas vacías
- Cómo el transporte y las tareas diarias influyen en lo que se considera conveniente
- Qué distancia estaría dispuesto a recorrer
- Qué tipos de puntos de devolución prefiere (consulte información adicional en la página siguiente)
- Cómo los depósitos y reembolsos podrían afectar al presupuesto de su hogar
- Beneficios o preocupaciones para su comunidad
- Qué haría que devolver envases valiera la pena

¿Qué es un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje?

Un programa de reembolsos por reciclaje (también denominado "ley de envases") significa:

- Los consumidores pagan un depósito cuando compran una bebida.
 - Recuperan ese depósito de vuelta cuando devuelven el envase vacío a un punto de devolución. El reembolso puede ser en forma de efectivo o pago digital.
- Este sistema incentiva el reciclaje y reduce la cantidad de residuos desechados.

Para consultas, contacte al:
564-999-0555 | recyclingreform@ecy.wa.gov



Survey and Interview Questions Explored Equity and Accessibility

- What barriers could make participation difficult for some communities?
- Which populations may face greater challenges accessing redemption services?
- What strategies could reduce barriers and support equitable participation?
- How should equity considerations influence future program design and implementation?

6 Equity and Access Gaps



Key questions

- What barriers could make participation difficult for some residents or communities?
- Which populations may face greater challenges accessing redemption services?
- How do transportation, mobility, language, technology, and financial factors influence participation?
- What strategies could reduce barriers and support equitable participation?
- How should equity considerations influence future program design and implementation?



Model Study Recommendation Connection

Informs equity assumptions, accessibility strategies, outreach approaches, and program design decisions to support equitable access across Washington.

Tribal Engagement

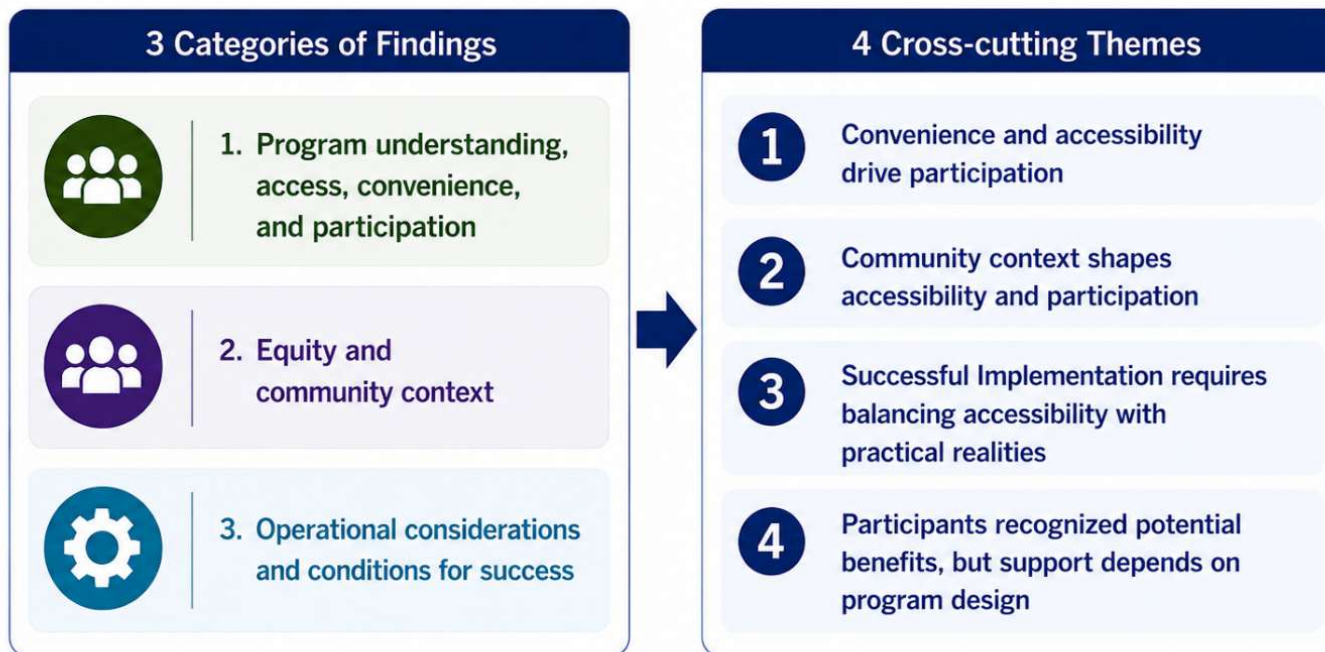
- Ecology invited formal consultation (December 2025)
- We conducted follow-up activities and outreach
- We will continue engagement in Phase II
- Interviews/meetings anticipated to take place over the summer



NOTE – The following slides present a preview of information that will be in the draft engagement report. The findings and information will be updated in the version of the report that is released for public comment and review

From Findings to Cross-Cutting Themes

The study team synthesized findings within each category to identify key cross-cutting themes that span the system and inform the draft recommendations.



These cross-cutting themes informed our analysis, shaped our recommendations, and reflect what people told us matters most for a successful program.

CROSS-CUTTING THEME 5.1


Convenience and Accessibility Drive Participation


Across all engagement methods, participants emphasized that **convenient and easy-to-use redemption opportunities** are critical to participation in a recycling refunds program.




Convenience is more than distance.
 It's about fitting redemption into everyday life.

PREFERRED LOCATION MATTERS

-  **74%** prefer redemption sites located near home
-  **54%** prefer locations near places they already visit, such as grocery stores, shopping destinations, and work

 Participants value redemption opportunities that align with their daily routines and familiar destinations.

TOP BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION (SURVEY)

-  Long wait times **67%**
-  Limited operating hours **63%**
-  Distance to redemption sites **62%**

 Even nearby sites may be inconvenient if they are difficult to use, unreliable, or disconnected from everyday activities.

WHY PARTICIPATE? (SURVEY)

-  Recover deposit money **66%**
-  Support recycling and environmental goals **65%**
-  Reduce litter and keep communities clean **56%**


 Financial incentives matter, but participants said they must be able to easily and conveniently recover their deposits.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID (INTERVIEWS & OTHER ENGAGEMENT)


“ Convenience isn't just about how close a site is. It's about reliable operations, reasonable wait times, convenient hours, cleanliness, safety, and a good overall experience. **”**

-  Reliable operations
-  Reasonable wait times
-  Convenient hours
-  Cleanliness
-  Safety
-  Positive user experience

THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING







 Most survey respondents reported some familiarity with recycling refunds programs.


Many interview participants had questions about how a Washington-specific system would operate.

 People want more information about locations, refund processes, eligible containers, and how the program interacts with existing services.

THE BIG PICTURE: CONVENIENCE IS MULTIFACETED

Participation depends on more than distance.

-  Location
-  Accessibility
-  Reliability
-  Ease of use
-  Public understanding
-  Fits everyday routines



CROSS-CUTTING THEME 5.2

Community Context Shapes Accessibility and Participation

Accessibility and participation depend on local conditions. Transportation, geography, services, resources, and local travel patterns all influence how people access redemption opportunities.



One state, many contexts. Equitable access means solutions that work for every community.

TRANSPORTATION PATTERNS VARY BY COMMUNITY DENSITY (SURVEY)

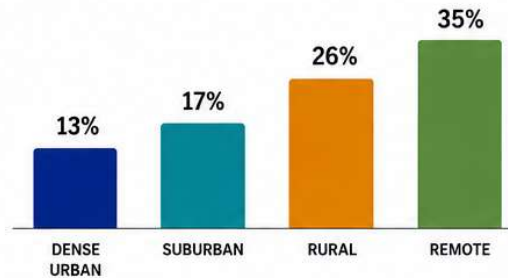
How respondents would travel to a redemption location

	DRIVE	WALK	PUBLIC TRANSIT
DENSE URBAN (Urban Core)	50%	23%	11%
SUBURBAN (Urban Area)	67%	8%	4%
RURAL (Small Town & Rural)	81%	2%	1%
REMOTE (Rural - Remote)	83%	1%	1%

Driving is the primary mode across all community types, but reliance on driving increases as population density decreases.

WILLINGNESS TO TRAVEL TO RETURN CONTAINERS BY COMMUNITY DENSITY (SURVEY)

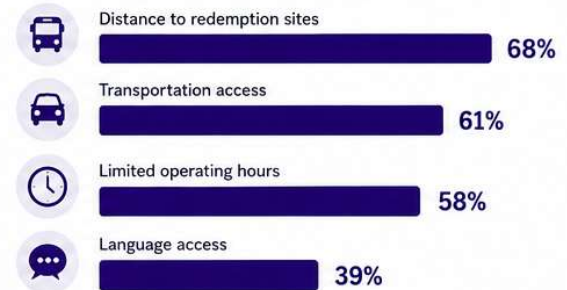
Percent willing to travel more than 15 minutes



Rural and remote respondents are more willing to travel farther, while most respondents across all community types prefer locations near home and near places they already visit.

BARRIERS IDENTIFIED BY COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS (SURVEY)

Top barriers for the communities they serve



Other important factors include disability access, awareness, trusted locations, cultural considerations, and access to information.

ACCESSIBILITY IS MORE THAN DISTANCE

Participants emphasized multiple factors that influence whether people can access and use redemption opportunities.

- Language access
- Disability access
- Awareness & information
- Trusted locations
- Cultural considerations
- Access to information

FLEXIBILITY TO REFLECT LOCAL CONDITIONS

Participants supported approaches that allow redemption locations, site types, and outreach strategies to reflect local needs.

- Consistent statewide access goals
- Flexibility to address different transportation patterns, infrastructure, service networks, and community needs
- Solutions shaped by local context and community input

THE BIG PICTURE



Equitable participation depends on more than geographic access alone.

- Transportation options
- Distance and travel expectations
- Language and disability access
- Trusted locations and awareness
- Local infrastructure and services
- Community needs and resources

CROSS-CUTTING THEME 5.3

Successful Implementation Requires Balancing Accessibility with Practical Realities

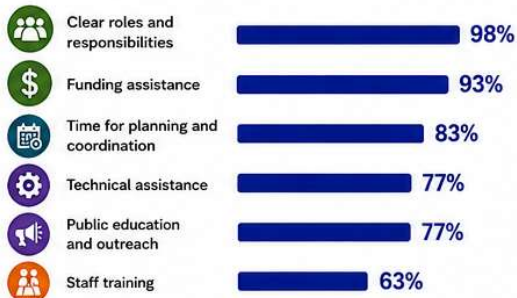
Participants support convenient, accessible redemption opportunities. Long-term success depends on effective, sustainable implementation that works in coordination with existing systems and services.





Success is about balance.
 Accessibility goals and practical realities must work together.

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT IS ESSENTIAL (SURVEY)

Local governments emphasized key factors for successful implementation. % of counties rating each factor as an important need




 Implementation planning, resources, and support are critical for local governments to succeed.

PRACTICAL IMPLEMENTATION CONSIDERATIONS (INTERVIEWS)

Participants across sectors emphasized real-world factors that influence successful implementation.



 These practical realities must be addressed to ensure a program that is operationally feasible, effective, and sustainable over the long term.

CLEAR GOVERNANCE AND ADMINISTRATION MATTER

Participants want a well-managed program with clear expectations and strong communication.



 Uncertainty about program administration can create challenges and slow implementation.

SYSTEM INTEGRATION IS CRITICAL

Participants raised important questions about how a recycling refunds program will interact with existing systems and services.




Avoiding duplication and conflicting requirements

 Coordinated implementation helps maximize benefits and avoid unintended consequences.

POTENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES

When designed and implemented well, a recycling refunds program can:




 Outcomes depend on program design, participation levels, and integration with existing recycling programs.

COSTS AND FEASIBILITY ARE KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Participants raised questions about a wide range of potential costs.



 The Engagement Study did not evaluate costs, but financial and operational feasibility are essential for long-term success.

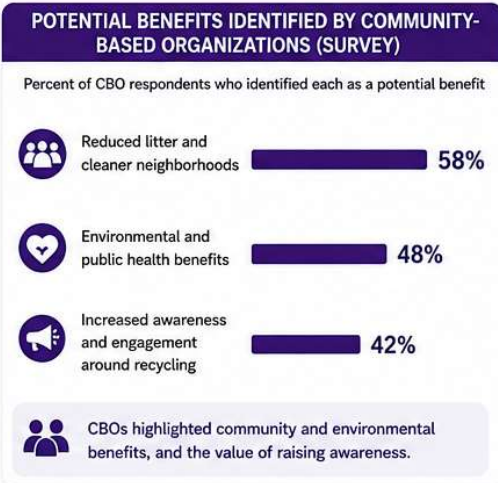
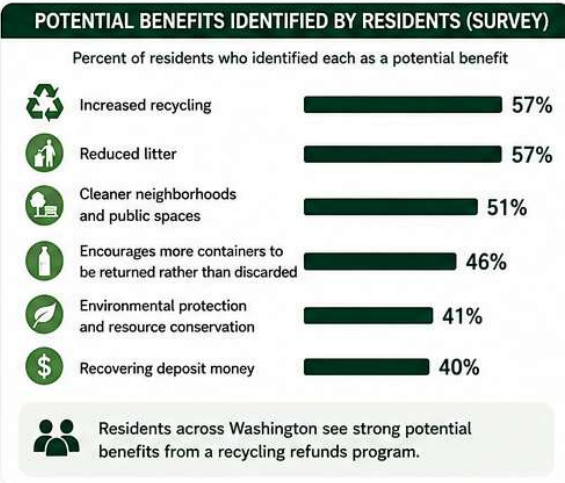
CROSS-CUTTING THEME 5.4

Participants Recognized Potential Benefits, but Support Depends on Program Design

Participants across nearly all engagement activities identified potential benefits, but emphasized that successful outcomes depend on how the program is designed, implemented, and communicated.



Benefits are real.
Support depends on program design, convenience, clear communication, and system performance.



BENEFITS ARE LINKED TO PRACTICAL REALITIES

Participants rarely discussed benefits in isolation. They evaluated them alongside questions about:

- Implementation and operations
- Costs and financial feasibility
- Convenience and accessibility
- Impacts on existing recycling systems

Outcomes depend on how the program is designed and implemented.

Retailers, local governments, recyclers, producers, collectors, haulers, and others emphasized these considerations.

PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING AND TRUST MATTER

Participants want clear information about how the program will work in practice.

Redemption locations	Eligible containers	Refund process	Site operations	Interaction with existing recycling services

Clear communication, multilingual materials, culturally responsive outreach, and trusted messengers are essential.

FOCUS IS ON HOW, NOT JUST WHETHER

Across engagement activities, participants focused more on how the program will function.

- Convenient redemption opportunities
- Effective implementation and administration
- Clear and consistent communication
- Coordination with existing recycling systems
- Long-term system performance

These factors are seen as key to achieving successful outcomes.

THE BIG PICTURE

Participants recognize the potential benefits. Success depends on strong program design and long-term performance.

		Recognized benefits
		Convenience and accessibility
		Implementation and operations
		Public understanding and trust
		Coordination with existing systems
		Long-term performance

Questions for Public Comment

- Do the preliminary recommendations appropriately reflect engagement findings and community priorities?
- Are there recommendations that should be modified, expanded, or removed?
- Are there additional considerations that should be reflected in future program planning or implementation?
- Are there specific recommendations that may affect certain communities or audience groups differently?
- Are there additional implementation considerations that should be evaluated before final recommendations are developed?

7.1 RECOMMENDATIONS REINFORCED THROUGH ENGAGEMENT

Key Conclusions and Recommendations Reinforced Through Engagement

Engagement findings across surveys, interviews, community-based activities, and Tribal engagement consistently reinforced these key conclusions and recommendations from the Model Study.



Participants consistently emphasized these priorities for a successful, equitable, and effective recycling refunds program in Washington.

1 MAINTAIN A STRONG FOCUS ON CONVENIENT AND ACCESSIBLE REDEMPTION OPPORTUNITIES



Convenience is the most important factor influencing participation. Location, hours, reliability, wait times, safety, and ease of use all matter.

2 CONTINUE USING DEPLOYMENT APPROACHES THAT REFLECT COMMUNITY DIFFERENCES



Different communities have different needs. Tailored approaches are essential for urban, suburban, rural, remote, Tribal Nation, overburdened, and underserved communities.

3 MAINTAIN A MIX OF REDEMPTION SITE TYPES TO SUPPORT FLEXIBILITY, CONVENIENCE, AND ACCESSIBILITY



A variety of site types helps meet diverse preferences, travel patterns, and local needs—making redemption easier and more accessible for everyone.

4 CONTINUE PRIORITIZING EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION AS A CORE PROGRAM OBJECTIVE



Equity must be at the center of program design, ensuring all communities have fair access, opportunities, and outcomes.

5 MAINTAIN A FOCUS ON LOCATING REDEMPTION SITES NEAR DESTINATIONS RESIDENTS ALREADY VISIT



People want redemption options near home and places they already go—like grocery stores, work, shopping, and other daily destinations.

6 CONTINUE EMPHASIZING ENVIRONMENTAL, LITTER REDUCTION, AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS AS IMPORTANT OUTCOMES



Participants value cleaner communities, less litter, environmental protection, and the positive impact recycling refunds can have for Washington.

7.2 RECOMMENDED REFINEMENTS TO THE MODEL STUDY RECOMMENDATIONS

Refinements to Strengthen the Recommended Scenario

Engagement findings support the overall direction of the Model Study's recommended scenario. The refinements below expand how convenience, accessibility, and equitable deployment are considered in future planning.



7.2.1 Refine the Definition of Convenience



RECOMMENDATION

Expand the definition of convenience beyond distance and drive-time.



ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Proximity alone does not determine whether a redemption opportunity is convenient.



POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ Operating hours
- ✓ Reliability and site availability
- ✓ Wait times
- ✓ Safety and security
- ✓ Accessibility
- ✓ Ease of use
- ✓ Integration into daily routines



7.2.2 Place Greater Emphasis on Daily Routines and Everyday Destinations



RECOMMENDATION

Use site placement to reflect how people move through their communities and the places they already visit.



ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Most respondents prefer sites near home (74%) and near places they already visit (54%).



POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ Use data on everyday destinations and travel patterns
- ✓ Identify and evaluate trusted public places
- ✓ Review convenience standards for daily destinations
- ✓ Balance geographic accessibility with convenience



7.2.3 Strengthen Community-Specific and Equity-Focused Strategies



RECOMMENDATION

Strengthen community-specific and equity-focused deployment strategies.



ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Experiences of access, convenience, and participation differ across communities.



POTENTIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- ✓ Transportation patterns
- ✓ Geography and service availability
- ✓ Language access
- ✓ Technology and banking access
- ✓ Overburdened and isolated communities
- ✓ Equitable access to refunds

7.3 ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Broader Opportunities to Strengthen Successful Implementation

Engagement activities identified broader considerations that may inform future policy discussions, implementation planning, and development of the final report. These recommendations focus on implementation, coordination, communication, and long-term program management rather than changes to the recommended redemption network.



1 INCORPORATE IMPLEMENTATION FEASIBILITY INTO FUTURE PLANNING AND EVALUATE COSTS



Consider operational factors that influence whether a redemption network can be successfully deployed, operated, and maintained over time, and evaluate implementation, operational, administrative, and infrastructure costs associated with alternative network designs and program approaches.

Key considerations include:

- Site availability and siting constraints
- Workforce and staffing needs
- Operational sustainability
- Security and safety
- Infrastructure readiness
- Long-term maintenance and management

2 COORDINATE WITH EXISTING RECYCLING SYSTEMS



Evaluate opportunities to coordinate implementation of a recycling refunds program with Washington's Recycling Reform Act, existing curbside recycling systems, and other recycling initiatives to reduce duplication, leverage existing investments, and improve overall system performance.

ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Participants highlighted the importance of alignment, leveraging investments, and reducing duplication across systems.

3 DEVELOP A COMPREHENSIVE EDUCATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGY

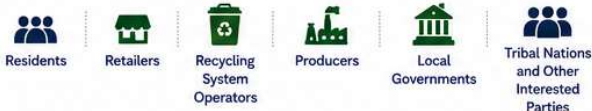


Develop a statewide outreach and education strategy that clearly explains how a recycling refunds program would operate and interact with existing recycling services.

ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Participants emphasized the need for clear, consistent information tailored to different audiences to build understanding and support participation.

Outreach should be tailored for:



4 CONTINUE COMMUNITY-BASED AND TRIBAL ENGAGEMENT



Continue working with trusted community organizations, local governments, and other established networks to support outreach, education, and participation.

Continue Government-to-Government consultation and engagement with Tribal Nations throughout future planning and implementation.

ENGAGEMENT FINDINGS

Participants value trusted relationships and Tribal consultation for effective outreach and meaningful participation.

NEXT STEPS

Continuing the Path to the Final Legislative Report

This public comment draft represents an intermediate step in the broader evaluation process. Your input will help shape the final recommendations and report.



1 PUBLIC REVIEW & ENGAGEMENT

Anticipated to open the week of July 6, 2026

- Public comment period will include opportunities to provide input.
- In-person and virtual informational sessions anticipated in July (dates and locations TBD).



2 REVIEW & CONSIDER INPUT

Ecology will review and consider:

- Public comments
- Tribal comments
- Informational session feedback
- Additional engagement activities

This input will inform refinement of findings and recommendations.



3 ADVISORY COUNCIL REVIEW

The Recycling Reform Act Advisory Council will review the report and provide input on future refinements and considerations.

Feedback from the Council and ongoing engagement will help shape the final report.



4 FINALIZE REPORT

The final report will incorporate:

- Engagement findings
- Validation results
- Public comments
- Advisory Council input
- Additional analyses completed during Phase II

Recommendations regarding a potential recycling refunds program will be included.



5 SUBMIT FINAL LEGISLATIVE REPORT

The final report will be submitted to the appropriate committees of the House of Representatives and the Senate of the Washington State Legislature in **January 2027**.



YOUR INPUT MAKES A DIFFERENCE

We encourage residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, industry representatives, and all interested parties to share your perspectives to help inform a recycling refunds program that is effective, equitable, and works for Washington communities.