

# New producer-pay recycling system lowers targets

Changes to goals for paper, plastic diversion in Ontario's new blue box program made to be more 'workable' for businesses

JEFF GRAY  
KATHRYN BLAZE BAUM

Ontario has unveiled the final details of its sweeping plan to hand over its entire blue box recycling system – and all of its costs – to the industries that produce the waste. But the new system includes lower diversion targets for paper and plastic than initially proposed.

Ontario had pledged the system, which has been the subject of complex talks with industry and municipalities for two years, would have the highest targets in North America. But at a news conference to introduce the regulations that will govern the system, Environment Minister Jeff Yurek said the targets will be "some of the highest."

Under the system, the goal for paper has been reduced to 80 per cent from 90 per cent between 2026 and 2029, the target floated last fall in draft rules, and to 85 per cent from 90 per cent in 2030.

Short-term targets for plastics were also reduced by five percentage points, with flexible plastic set at just 25 per cent before rising to 40 per cent in 2030.

Mr. Yurek said the changes



Workers sort through material at a recycling facility in Toronto. The province says the new recycling system could save municipalities more than \$150-million a year. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

were made after consultations with business to ensure the targets were "technically feasible."

"After consultation, we're setting the bar really, really high," Mr. Yurek said. "But at the same time, we want to ensure that we are making it workable."

Environmental groups said the plan's targets were watered down because of industry lobbying.

"The fact is that the targets were pretty terribly low already to begin with, and I think it's really out of step when it comes to what most people want," said Emily Alfred of the Toronto Environmental Alliance. "There's been pretty bad public consulta-

tion on this. But there have been pretty steady meetings with businesses and industry."

The concept behind the province's plan, known as extended producer responsibility (EPR), is similar to systems in B.C. and Europe, and is supported in principle by environmentalists, business groups and experts.

In Ontario, EPR has been the subject of drawn out discussions among retailers, plastic and paper producers and municipalities for years. In 2019, the PC government moved to speed up the process, aiming to start the transition in 2023, and switch the entire province by 2026.

As part of an effort to reach

zero plastic waste by 2030, the federal government has said it intends to ban single-use plastic items such as straws or stir sticks. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has also said Ottawa will work with the provinces and territories toward EPR programs and require some products to contain a set amount of recycled content.

Ontario municipalities run the blue box system now, with industry covering 50 per cent of its costs. By handing over the entire cost and control of the system – with government-mandated diversion targets – to those who produce the waste, the provincial government hopes industry will reduce packaging to save money. Mr. Yurek also says the massive change is needed to address diversion rates, which have stalled at around 60 per cent for the past 15 years. Up to a third of what goes into blue bins is sent to landfill.

The province says the new system could save municipalities more than \$150-million a year, and the Association of Municipalities of Ontario welcomed the new regulations. Some municipalities raised concerns last year when a draft of the plan suggested parks, schools and towns with fewer than 5,000 people would be exempt, leaving local governments with the cost. But the new regime will cover these areas, as well as non-profit long-term care homes, and encompass all communities outside the Far North.

The change will standardize a fragmented system, meaning the same items will be accepted in

blue boxes across the province. (Bottle and can return systems for beer and other alcoholic beverages will remain in place.)

Precisely how the EPR regime will work is unclear. Producers – retailers, beverage bottlers, plastics companies – are expected to set up organizations to fund and run the system. They could contract collection to waste haulers or municipalities that now perform the service.

A report commissioned by the Retail Council of Canada estimates the overall cost of the new system at more than \$600-million a year, about double its current total.

Jo-Anne St. Godard, executive director of the Circular Innovation Council, formerly the Recycling Council of Ontario, deemed the transition "important and bold." However, she said she is concerned by the reduced diversion requirements, which don't kick in until 2026.

"We've got five years where we don't have targets that need to be hit," she said. "That's concerning. Doubly concerning is that, in 2026, we're suggesting targets that don't really have any significant level of improvement."

Patrick Dovigi, president and CEO of waste hauling giant GFL Environmental Inc., which handles half of Toronto's residential waste and recycling collection, was on hand with other industry representatives for the government's virtual announcement. He said his company's fleet of trucks and waste-sorting facilities could "recover much of Ontario's blue box materials."