

Public Review Summary of the Draft Recycling Refunds Engagement Study

About this Summary

The Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) prepared this Public Review Summary to provide a concise overview of the Draft Recycling Refunds Engagement Study. The study evaluated assumptions and recommendations from the [Recycling Refund Model Study](#) through statewide engagement with residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, recycling system participants, retailers, producers, and other interested parties. This document provides a concise overview of the Draft Recycling Refunds Engagement Study, including selected findings, key themes, and preliminary recommendations for public review and comment. The full Draft Engagement Study and Technical Appendix are available on Ecology's Recycling Refunds Study public comment webpage.

Why Was This Study Conducted?

The Washington State Legislature directed Ecology, through the [Recycling Reform Act](#), to evaluate how a potential recycling refunds program could provide convenient, accessible, and equitable redemption opportunities across Washington. This Engagement Study builds on the Recycling Refund Model Study by incorporating public, Tribal, local government, community organization, and recycling system perspectives into future program planning. Ecology retained an independent consultant team led by Eastern Research Group (ERG), in partnership with Cascadia Consulting Group, HDR, Start Consulting, and Resource Recycling Systems (RRS), to conduct the studies.

What is a Recycling Refunds Program?

A recycling refunds program adds a refundable deposit to eligible beverage containers when they are purchased. Consumers receive the deposit back when they return empty containers to an approved redemption site for recycling. Redemption opportunities can include staffed redemption centers, self-service return sites, mobile collection services, and other convenient return options.

Questions for Public Review

The findings and recommendations in this summary are preliminary. Ecology is seeking public input before preparing the final report for the Washington State Legislature.

As you review this summary, please consider the following questions:

- Do the preliminary recommendations appropriately reflect the engagement findings and community priorities identified through this study?
- Should any preliminary recommendations be modified, expanded, combined, 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, geographic areas, or groups differently?
- Are there additional implementation considerations that should be evaluated before final recommendations are developed?

Executive Summary of Recycling Refunds Engagement Study

The following Executive Summary is reproduced from the Draft Recycling Refunds Engagement Study. It provides a high-level overview of the study purpose, engagement findings, and preliminary recommendations.

The [Recycling Reform Act](#) directs the Washington State Department of Ecology (Ecology) to evaluate the potential statewide impacts of a recycling refunds program, also known as a beverage container deposit return system, in Washington state. The studies must prioritize equity, accessibility, and community perspectives. Under such a program, consumers pay a refundable deposit on eligible beverage containers and receive it back when containers are returned to an approved collection site, known as a redemption site. Washington does not currently have a recycling refunds program.

To support the Legislature's evaluation, Ecology conducted two complementary studies. The Recycling Refund Model Study used geographic modeling to evaluate redemption site network designs and recommended approximately 685 statewide redemption opportunities, including full-service centers, express sites, and mobile options. The recommended network was designed to reflect the needs of different communities. It prioritized redemption sites in places people already visit as part of their daily routines, offered immediate cash refund options where banking or digital access may be limited, and included tailored approaches for overburdened, rural, remote, Tribal, and island communities.

The Engagement Study evaluated the Model Study's assumptions and recommendations through statewide engagement with residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, recycling system participants, retailers, producers, and other interested parties. Engagement methods included a statewide survey, interviews, partnerships with community-based organizations, Tribal engagement and consultation. The survey received 2,616 survey responses from all 39 Washington counties and interviews included more than 60 participants. These findings were used to compare to the Model Study's assumptions and recommendations and develop updated preliminary recommendations.

Summary of Engagement Findings

Overall, engagement findings supported the direction of the Model Study while identifying opportunities to refine design assumptions and strengthen future planning and implementation. The study team organized findings into three categories that reflect the major questions explored throughout the study.

Program Understanding, Access, Convenience, and Participation

Residents consistently identified convenience as a key factor influencing participation. Other participants emphasized that convenience includes more than travel distance: operating hours, reliability, wait times, safety, accessibility, ease of use, and the ability to return containers during existing daily routines. They supported multiple redemption site types near destinations people already visit.

Equity and Community Context

Residents, community-based organizations, Tribal participants, and local governments emphasized that accessibility needs vary across Washington because transportation patterns, geography, service availability, and community priorities differ among urban, suburban, rural, remote, Tribal, overburdened, and underserved communities. They supported community-specific approaches that preserve statewide accessibility goals while using trusted partnerships, culturally responsive outreach, language access, and other strategies to reduce participation barriers.

Operational Considerations and Conditions for Success

Implementation feasibility emerged as a recurring theme across nearly every audience group. Participants discussed costs, funding responsibilities, siting, staffing, infrastructure, operational sustainability, governance, long-term management, and coordination with Washington's existing recycling system. Residents also identified potential environmental and community benefits, including increased recycling, reduced litter, cleaner communities, and improved environmental outcomes, while noting that these benefits depend on a convenient, accessible, equitable, and well-managed program.

Updated Preliminary Recommendations

Based on these findings, the study team developed nine preliminary recommendations that validate, refine, and expand upon the Model Study's recommendations while preserving its technical foundation and incorporating community perspectives.

Defining Convenience

Continue using measurable, community-specific accessibility standards as the foundation for evaluating convenient access to redemption opportunities across Washington. Future planning should also consider operating hours, reliability, accessibility, safety, and how redemption opportunities fit into residents' daily routines.

Redemption Site Placement and Management

Maintain a flexible, community-based redemption network with multiple site types to meet differing community needs. Coordinate redemption sites with Washington's existing recycling system to complement current services, reduce duplication, and improve overall system performance.

Ensuring Equity

Continue using community-specific equity strategies that recognize differences in transportation, accessibility needs, and local community priorities. Expand accessibility through community partnerships, culturally responsive outreach, reduced participation barriers, and organizations that communities know and trust.

Planning, Reporting, and Accountability

Evaluate implementation costs, funding responsibilities, and broader system impacts to support informed legislative decisions and future program planning. Clearly define governance structures and the roles and responsibilities of Ecology, producers, retailers, local governments, Tribal Nations, and other implementation partners. Plan for ongoing monitoring and adaptive management by tracking program performance, incorporating community feedback, and making improvements over time.

Public Review

This report presents preliminary findings and recommendations for public review, with Ecology seeking feedback on whether they reflect community experiences, participant input, and additional topics to consider before final recommendations are developed. During public review, Ecology will continue engaging residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, industry representatives, and other interested parties through public comment, Tribal engagement and consultation, informational sessions, and Advisory Council review. Feedback will help refine the final legislative report to the Washington State Legislature in January 2027. A Technical Appendix provides additional detail on engagement methodology, supporting analyses, and supplemental materials.

Additional Information for Public Review

The following sections provide additional information about the engagement findings, key themes, and preliminary recommendations to support public review and comment. These sections have been adapted from the Draft Recycling Refunds Engagement Study to present the information in a concise format.

Summary of Engagement Findings

Across all engagement activities, participants emphasized that the success of a potential recycling refunds program in Washington will depend not only on what the program does, but on how it is designed and implemented. To help organize and communicate these findings, the study team synthesized the findings into the four categories described below. Together, these categories highlight the factors participants identified as most important to public participation and program effectiveness, including helping residents understand how the program would operate, providing convenient and accessible redemption opportunities, reflecting the differing needs of communities across the state, and thoughtfully planning for successful implementation.

Program Understanding, Access, Convenience, and Participation

Residents were generally familiar with the concept of a recycling refunds program but wanted more information about how a program would operate in Washington, including where containers could be returned, how refunds would be provided, and how the program would interact with existing recycling services. Convenience consistently emerged as one of the most important factors influencing participation. Residents described convenience as extending beyond travel distance to include operating hours, reliability, accessibility, safety, wait times, and the ability to return containers as part of existing daily routines. They also supported offering multiple redemption site types located near their homes and places they already visit and emphasized that making redemption opportunities easy to access and use will be important to encouraging participation.

Equity and Community Context

Residents, community-based organizations, Tribal participants, and local governments emphasized that accessibility needs differ across Washington. Participants generally supported community-specific approaches that reflect differences in transportation, geography, service availability, and local priorities while maintaining statewide accessibility goals. They also highlighted the importance of trusted community partnerships, culturally responsive outreach, language access, and reducing barriers to participation so redemption opportunities are accessible across diverse communities.

Operational Considerations and Conditions for Success

Implementation feasibility emerged as an important consideration across nearly every audience group. Local governments and recycling system operators frequently discussed implementation costs, funding responsibilities, governance, staffing, infrastructure, long-term program management, and coordination with Washington's existing recycling system. Residents also identified increased recycling, reduced litter, cleaner communities, and improved environmental outcomes as potential benefits of a recycling refunds program. Across audience groups, participants emphasized that achieving these benefits will depend on creating a program that is convenient, accessible, equitable, and well managed.

Themes and Synthesis

Several common themes emerged across participant groups. Although perspectives varied, these themes consistently appeared throughout the engagement process and help explain how participants viewed a potential recycling refunds program.

Convenience Means More Than Travel Time

Residents consistently identified convenience as one of the most important factors influencing participation. While many supported the accessibility standards developed through the Model Study, they described convenience more broadly than travel distance to the nearest redemption site alone. Operating hours, reliability, safety, accessibility, wait times, and the ability to return containers during existing daily routines - such as public places like libraries, schools, and community centers - all influenced whether a redemption opportunity was considered convenient.

Community Needs Differ Across Washington

Local governments, residents, and community groups emphasized that no single redemption approach will meet the needs of every community across Washington. Transportation options, geography, population density, existing services, and daily routines differ substantially among urban, suburban, rural, remote, Tribal, overburdened, and underserved communities, influencing both how people travel and where they would be most likely to redeem containers. Participants generally supported maintaining consistent statewide accessibility goals while allowing flexibility in redemption site types, locations, operating hours, and service delivery to reflect local conditions and community priorities.

Successful Implementation Requires Thoughtful Planning

Participants across nearly every audience group emphasized that successful implementation will require thoughtful planning beyond the design of the redemption site network itself, which was the focus of the Model Study. They highlighted the importance of clear governance and accountability, sustainable funding, operational feasibility for redemption site operators, and coordination with Washington's existing curbside recycling and solid waste systems. Participants also emphasized investing in public education and trusted community partnerships to support participation, minimizing unintended impacts on existing recycling infrastructure, and using ongoing monitoring and evaluation to identify challenges and improve the program over time.

Program Benefits Depend on Thoughtful Design

Participants in all audience groups generally agreed that a recycling refunds program has the potential to increase recycling, reduce litter, improve the quality of recycled materials, conserve resources, and support a more circular economy. However, they consistently emphasized that these outcomes are not guaranteed. Participants noted that achieving these benefits will depend on thoughtful program design, including convenient and accessible redemption opportunities, equitable access across communities, effective public education, and coordination with existing recycling infrastructure and the new extended producer responsibility program being implemented through that legislation.

Overall Synthesis

Overall, engagement findings generally supported the direction of the Recycling Refunds Model Study while identifying opportunities to refine the Model Study's recommendations and strengthen future planning and implementation. Participants consistently reinforced the importance of convenient and

accessible redemption opportunities, flexible approaches that reflect community needs, equitable participation, and thoughtful implementation planning. Based on these findings, the study team developed updated recommendations organized into four topic areas. Together, these recommendations build on the Model Study by incorporating community and stakeholder perspectives into future program considerations.

Preliminary Recommendations for Public Review

Engagement Study developed nine preliminary recommendations based on statewide engagement findings. Together, these recommendations validate, refine, and expand upon the Recycling Refund Model Study by incorporating community and other interested parties' perspectives into future program planning. The nine recommendations are organized into four topic areas.

Defining Convenience

1. Continue using measurable, community-specific accessibility standards.
2. Expand how convenience is evaluated.

Redemption Site Placement and Management

3. Maintain a flexible, community-based redemption network.
4. Coordinate redemption sites with Washington's existing recycling system.

Ensuring Equity

5. Continue using community-specific equity strategies.
6. Expand accessibility through trusted community partnerships.

Planning, Reporting, and Accountability

7. Evaluate implementation costs, funding responsibilities, and broader system impacts.
8. Clarify governance, roles, and responsibilities.
9. Plan for ongoing monitoring and adaptive management.

Defining Convenience

Continue to use measurable, community-specific accessibility standards as the foundation for evaluating convenient access to redemption opportunities across Washington. Future planning should expand how convenience is evaluated by recognizing that convenient access depends on more than travel time alone. Participants emphasized the importance of operating hours, reliability, accessibility, safety, and the ability to return containers as part of existing daily routines when evaluating whether redemption opportunities are convenient. For example, participants noted that a redemption site located near a grocery store with convenient hours may be more practical than a closer site with limited hours or frequent closures.

Redemption Site Placement and Management

Maintain a flexible, community-based redemption network that includes multiple redemption site types to meet the differing needs of communities across the state. Participants also emphasized the importance of coordinating potential future redemption sites with Washington's existing recycling system to complement current services, reduce duplication, and improve overall system performance.

For example, communities may benefit from different combinations of redemption centers, retailer-operated sites, mobile services, or other collection options depending on local needs and existing infrastructure.

Ensuring Equity

Continue to use community-specific approaches that recognize differences in transportation, accessibility needs, geography, and local priorities across Washington. Participants also emphasized expanding accessibility through trusted community partnerships, culturally responsive outreach, language access, and efforts to reduce barriers to participation, so redemption opportunities are accessible across diverse communities. For example, participants suggested partnering with trusted local organizations to provide outreach and education in multiple languages and designing redemption opportunities that reflect the transportation and accessibility needs of different communities.

Planning, Reporting, and Accountability

Evaluate implementation costs, funding responsibilities, and broader system impacts to support informed legislative decisions and future program planning. Participants also emphasized the importance of clearly defining governance roles and responsibilities and establishing ongoing monitoring and adaptive management to evaluate program performance, incorporate community feedback, and support continuous improvement over time. For example, participants recommended clearly identifying the responsibilities of Ecology, producers, retailers, local governments, and other implementation partners while regularly evaluating program performance and making improvements as needed.

Conclusions

The Engagement Study gathered perspectives from residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, recycling system participants, retailers, producers, and other interested parties across Washington. Overall, the findings reinforced many of the Model Study's recommendations while identifying opportunities to strengthen future planning and implementation. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of convenient and accessible redemption opportunities, flexible approaches that reflect local community needs, equitable participation, and thoughtful implementation planning. The preliminary recommendations presented in this summary are intended to support continued public discussion and will be refined based on public comments and additional engagement before Ecology prepares the final report for the Washington State Legislature.

Next Steps

This Public Review Summary presents preliminary findings and recommendations for public review. During the public comment period, the Washington State Department of Ecology will continue gathering input from residents, Tribal Nations, local governments, community organizations, industry representatives, and other interested parties through public comments, Tribal engagement and consultation, informational sessions, and Advisory Council review. Ecology will use this feedback to refine the findings and recommendations before submitting the final Engagement Study report to the Washington State Legislature in January 2027. Additional background information, detailed methodology, supporting analyses, and complete findings are available in the Draft Engagement Study and accompanying Technical Appendix.