

Zero Waste

Cradle-to-Cradle Principles for the 21st Century

Policy

The Sierra Club's policy for reducing waste is based on [Zero Waste](#). Zero Waste is a design principle and planning approach for the environmental management of resources. It aims to prevent waste by design rather than manage it after the fact. Sierra Club's Zero Waste policy addresses not only the quantity of waste we generate, but also its toxicity, its contribution to climate change, and the important links between waste reduction and corporate responsibility.

The **goals** of the Sierra Club Zero Waste policy integrate social, environmental and economic outcomes:

- Protecting public health and the environment from pollution and greenhouse gas production.
- Conserving raw materials and energy in the production, transportation, and disposal of goods.
- Reducing overconsumption by encouraging the consumer to eliminate the purchase of unnecessary goods and packaging, especially single use, disposable items.
- Facilitating community economic development and local jobs in repair, refurbishing and recycling.
- Internalizing environmental and social costs in the prices of products and services.
- Encouraging "Cradle to cradle" design and management systems that cycle all materials safely back into the environment or the marketplace.

In pursuing these goals, the Sierra Club adopts the following **principles**:

1. Zero Waste Hierarchy: Environmental management of materials and energy should adhere to this order of priority: first, *reduce* the use of materials and energy and the use of toxic substances to a minimum (through design for the environment); second, *repair and reuse*, extending the service life of materials and products; and third, *recycle*, conserving as much as possible of embodied value.
2. Government Responsibility to protect the commons: Governments at all levels are obligated to protect public health and the environment. They do this by fostering an economic system that fully values environmental and social costs and by providing public services and amenities that the market cannot or should not provide. The removal of government subsidies for the extraction of virgin materials and other subsidies for wasteful consumption are key elements of this principle.
3. Producer and Consumer Responsibility for products: Any producer introducing products and services into commerce should design them in accordance with the Zero Waste Hierarchy and to make returning used products for reuse, repair or recycling as easy as purchasing new products. Consumers are responsible for returning those products for reuse or recycling to services provided by producers or their agents.
4. Transparency and Accountability: Waste program development and operation are open and provide opportunity for input to all stakeholders. Industry is accountable to both government and consumers for environmental outcomes.

In accordance with these goals and principles, the Sierra Club adopts the following **specific policies**, which apply to municipal solid waste both in the United States and internationally:

(1) The Sierra Club supports **Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)**¹ implemented through legislation and regulation that specifies, for each designated product category:

- Producers (or first importers) must have an approved plan for how they will recover, at no cost to taxpayers, their products when consumers are done with them, as a condition for sale in a jurisdiction.
- Social and environmental standards that must be met in the plan, including adherence to the Zero Waste Hierarchy, no export of discarded products containing hazardous materials to poor countries, and no use of prison labor.
- Measurable results, outcomes and deadlines (e.g., recovery or disposal rates);
- Consequences for non-compliance.

(2) The Sierra Club supports **local government initiatives** to support EPR and the Zero Waste Hierarchy, specifically:

- Official commitment to Zero Waste and EPR via resolutions, ordinances and plans based on comprehensive waste characterization studies and highest best use of materials.
- Complete assessment of environmental and health effects should be made for all waste-management processes considered.
- Selective bans on the sale of non-recyclable products and on the disposal of recyclable materials like plant material and products for which there are local recycling or EPR programs; and caps (limits) on disposal.
- Land use policies and zoning that encourage development of reuse, repair and recycling businesses in business districts.
- Ensuring adequate local infrastructure for managing food scraps and yard trimmings (grass, leaves, brush and branches, and tree stumps), returning these materials to the soil, and recovering energy through natural biological processes that preserve the ability of the material to be used as soil amendment.
- Providing public education about energy and resource conservation, successful Zero Waste plans, and existing EPR services.

(3) The Sierra Club supports government measures to ensure **public involvement and transparency**:

- The public should have access to full information and ample opportunity to comment on Zero Waste plans, including EPR stewardship plans and community programs for managing food scraps and yard trimmings.
- Local governments should be required to create advisory committees with voting representatives from a wide range of non-governmental organizations representing environmental interests to help develop all programs dealing with products found in the waste stream and to review all plans and legally binding programs developed for the jurisdiction.
- Data regarding the performance of Zero Waste and EPR programs should be presented regularly on the internet and in local media.

¹ *Extended Producer Responsibility* means whoever designs, produces, sells, or uses a product takes responsibility for minimizing the product's environmental impact throughout all stages of the products' life cycle—and the greatest responsibility lies with producers (brand owners) because they make critical design and marketing decisions. EPR is sometimes called *product stewardship*.

(4) The Sierra Club supports government measures to **prevent harm** to human health and the environment from the management of wastes, **in our country and in other countries**:

- Discarded products, packaging, food scraps, yard trimmings and any remaining residual garbage should be managed as close as possible to the point of generation.
- The United States should ratify the Basel Convention and support the proposed ban on the export of discarded products containing hazardous substances from rich countries to poor ones.

(5) To promote these goals, principles and policies, **the Sierra Club will**:

- Show how waste reduction, reuse, recycling and composting can significantly reduce the creation of greenhouse gases.
- Work toward the adoption of laws, regulations, and international agreements to implement this policy.

Approved by the Sierra Club Board of Directors, February 23, 2008.