

New Zealand invests in growing its domestic recycling industry to create jobs and dump less rubbish at landfills

September 17 2020, by Jeff Seadon



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

New Zealand's government recently put more than NZ\$160 million towards developing a [domestic recycling sector](#) to create jobs as part of its [economic recovery](#) from the COVID-19 pandemic.

New Zealanders [recycle 1.3 million tons](#) of materials each year, but 70% is currently exported. A recent NZ\$36.7 million funding boost to [upgrade recycling plants](#) throughout the country followed a NZ\$124 million [injection into recycling infrastructure](#) to grow processing capacity onshore. The investment signals a focus on supporting services that create employment and increase efficiency or reduce waste.

The potential for expansion in onshore processing of recyclable waste is enormous—and it could lead to 3.1 million tons of waste being diverted from landfills. But it will only work if it is part of a strategy with clear and measurable targets.

COVID-19 impacts

During New Zealand's level 4 lockdown between March and May, general rubbish collection was classed as an essential service and continued to operate. But [recycling](#) was sporadic.

Whether or not recycling services continued depended on storage space and the ability to separate recyclables under lockdown conditions. Facilities that relied on manual sorting could not meet those requirements and their recycling was sent to [landfill](#). Only recycling plants with automated sorting could operate.

New Zealand's reliance on [international markets](#) showed a lack of resilience in the waste management system. Any changes in international prices were duplicated in New Zealand and while exports could continue under tighter border controls, it was no longer economically viable to do so for certain recyclable materials.

International cardboard and paper markets collapsed and operators without sufficient storage space [sent materials to landfill](#). Most plastics became uneconomic to recycle.

In contrast, for materials processed in New Zealand—including glass, metals and some plastics—recycling remains viable. Many local authorities are now limiting their plastic collections to those types that have [expanding onshore processing capacity](#).

Soft packaging plastics are also being collected again, but [only in some places](#) and in smaller quantities than at the height of the [soft plastics recycling scheme](#), to be turned into fence posts and other farm materials.

The investment in onshore processing facilities is part of a move towards a [circular economy](#). The government provided the [capital for plants](#) to recycle [PET plastics](#), used to make most drink bottles and food trays. PET plastics can be reprocessed several times.

This means items such as meat trays previously made from polystyrene, which is not recyclable from households, could be made from fully recyclable PET. Some of the [most recent funding](#) goes towards providing [automatic optical sorters](#) to allow recycling plants to keep operating under lockdown conditions.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Regulation changes

The government also announced an expansion of the landfill levy to cover more types of landfills and for those that accept household waste a [progressive increase](#) from NZ\$10 to NZ\$60 per ton of waste.

This will provide more money for the [Waste Minimisation Fund](#), which in turn funds projects that lead to more onshore processing and jobs.

Last year's ban on single-use plastic bags took more than [a billion bags out of circulation](#), which represents about 180 tons of [plastic](#) that is not landfilled. But this is a small portion of the 3.7 million tons of waste that go to landfill each year.

More substantial diversion schemes include [mandatory product stewardship schemes](#) currently being implemented for tires, electrical and [electronic products](#), agrichemicals and their containers, refrigerants and other synthetic greenhouse gasses, farm plastics and packaging.

An example of the potential gains for product stewardship schemes is e-waste. Currently New Zealand produces about [80,000 tons of e-waste](#) per year, but recycles only about 2% (1,600 tons), most of which goes offshore for processing. Under the scheme, e-waste will be brought to collection depots and more will be processed onshore.

Landfilling New Zealand's total annual [e-waste](#) provides about 50 jobs. Recycling it could create 200 jobs and reusing it is estimated to [provide work for 6,400 people](#).

But all these initiatives are not enough. We need a coordinated strategy with clear targets.

The current [Waste Strategy](#) has only two goals: to reduce the harmful effects of waste and improve resource use efficiency. Such vague goals have resulted in a [37% increase in waste disposal to landfill](#) in the last decade.

An earlier 2002 strategy achieved [significantly better progress](#). The challenge is clear. A government strategy with measurable targets for [waste](#) diversion from landfill can lead us to better resource use and more jobs.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: New Zealand invests in growing its domestic recycling industry to create jobs and dump less rubbish at landfills (2020, September 17) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-09-zealand-invests-domestic-recycling-industry.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.