

Decreasing Plastic Pollution in Fort Collins

May 9th, 2025

A Society Wrapped in Plastic

Plastic pollution threatens the fundamental right to a clean, safe environment, free from contamination in our food, bodies, and ecosystems. Future generations deserve to live on a thriving planet that sustains diverse life forms. In a democratic society, all people, not just powerful industries, are entitled to a say in the world's future. Through collective action, community groups can create meaningful change that leads to large-scale solutions to plastic pollution.

An Inescapable Risk

Countless everyday items are made from plastic— forks, grocery bags, even clothes. From packaging to car parts, plastic is everywhere, largely due to its cheap, durable, and incredibly versatile characteristics. This convenience comes at a cost. Plastic is inescapable, and its widespread use poses serious risks for both environmental and human health. Medical professionals are increasingly concerned as microplastics enter our food sources and, ultimately, our bodies. According to Preetam Basu and Thanos Papadopoulos, professors at the Kent School of Business, "The slow decomposition of disposable cups, especially those with plastic linings, can lead to the release of microplastics into the environment," highlighting the persistent impact of single-use plastics on our environment.

Much of the environmental harm caused by single-use plastics occurs long before these products reach consumers. The plastic life cycle starts with the extraction of crude oil, followed by production and transportation, all before a brief moment of human use and prompt banishment to a life of degradation. According to *The Guardian*, the emissions from a single-use plastic cup range from 10g to 30g of carbon dioxide emissions. The result of this energy and labor-intensive process is a product that's often seen as too complicated to recycle and is too durable to decompose. Almost all of the plastic ever produced still exists today in some form, as it takes centuries for plastic compounds to break down. From 1950 to 2015, approximately 79% of plastic waste ended up in landfills or natural environments, according to a review by Christopher Rhodes, director at Fresh-lands Environmental

Actions. These numbers illustrate the complexity of the plastic problem. Our current systems of production and disposal are failing. Despite decades of awareness, the vast majority of plastic waste still accumulates, polluting the planet that humans and thousands of other species rely on for survival. Without systemic change and public pressure, this destructive pattern will only accelerate.

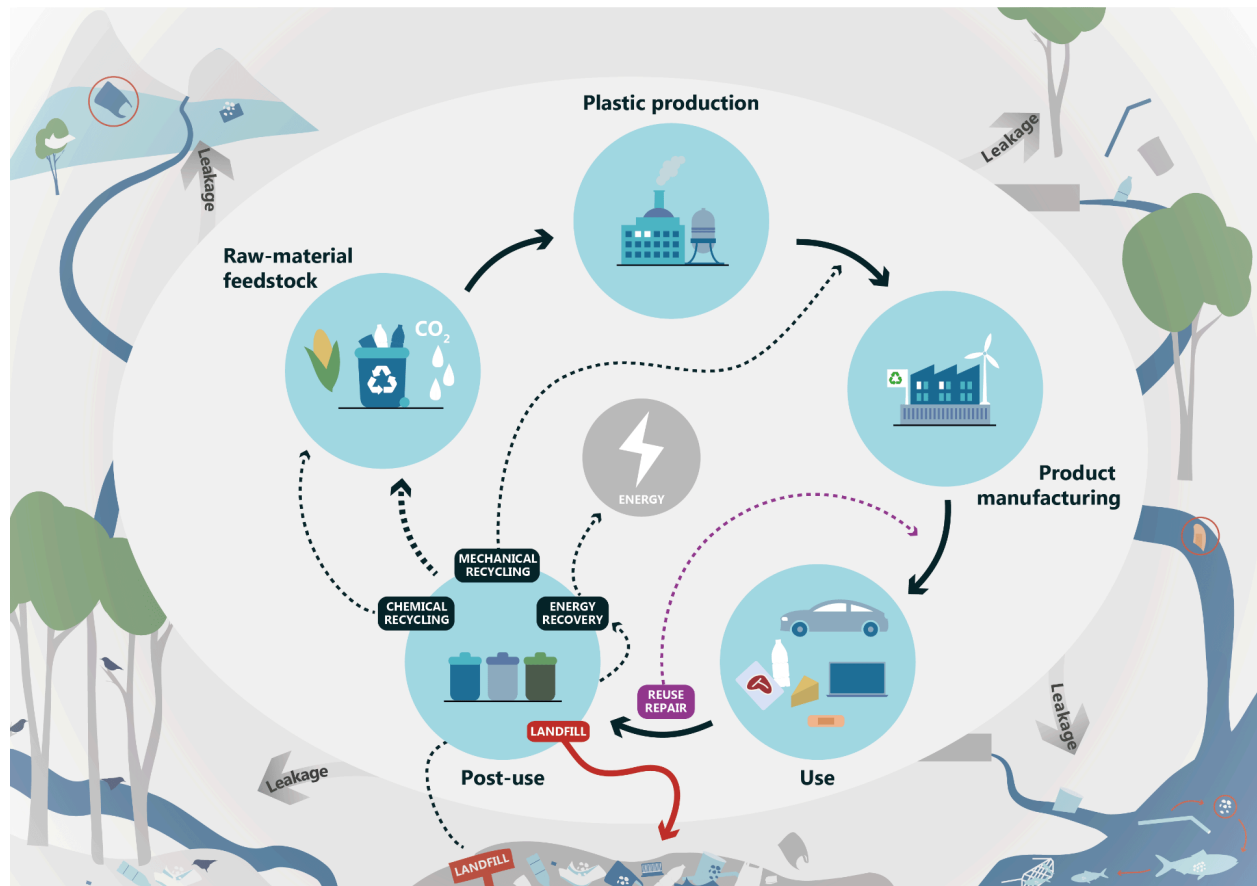


Image from debrisfreeoceans.org

The City That Steps Up

Joe Castillo serves as the Chief Sustainability Officer (CSO) of Fort Collins, leading one of the most forward-thinking municipal sustainability programs in the country. Under his guidance, the Fort Collins' sustainability team operates on the *Triple Bottom Line* framework, integrating environmental services, economic health, and social sustainability. With this framework, the team strives to “create innovative alliances with the Fort Collins community to forge deeper investments in our economic, environmental, and social triple bottom line”, according to their website. This structure uniquely positions Fort Collins as a leader in building resilient, thriving communities. Under Castillo's leadership, the city aims to create innovative alliances with local businesses, nonprofits, and community groups.

Wolverine Farm Publick House stands as a natural partner for advancing this mission. Though it presents itself as a coffee shop, it is the beating heart of a 501(c) non-profit dedicated to fostering a community of creative, informed, and engaged citizens living in a diverse, healthy, and beautiful world. This space serves as a publishing house for writers, a gathering space for local events, and a vibrant cultural center for Northern Colorado. Wolverine Farm recognizes that sustainability is at the core of creating a resilient, equitable, and sustainable city, and from this belief came the *Way Cup* Initiative– a program designed to reduce reliance on single-use plastic cups while supporting the growth of local, circular economies. This aligns perfectly with the City of Fort Collins’ commitment to collaboration in achieving meaningful, lasting change.

A Call To Cup Action

The community members of Wolverine Farm invite Joe Castillo and his team of dedicated sustainability professionals to join Wolverine Farm Publick House in pushing the boundaries of what’s possible through the citywide implementation of the Way Cup Initiative. The Way Cup itself is a 12 oz. reusable coffee cup that is dishwasher safe and made from compostable materials. For a \$12 deposit, the Way Cup is yours to keep and reuse for as long as you want. When you no longer need it, you can return it for a full refund. The cups are then sanitized and made available in the program once again, closing the loop in the product’s life cycle. Reusable drinkware relieves local businesses of the burden of purchasing single-use cups. When their product is the content of the cup and not the vessel itself, businesses can make 50 cents more from every beverage purchase without increasing their prices. The pilot program is sponsored in part by a Community Leadership Grant from the Fort Collins Environmental Services Department. Considering the city’s substantial initial investment, continuing this work on a wider scale and permanent basis is the next logical step. By implementing the Way Cup pilot program into a citywide reusable cup program, Fort Collins can embrace sustainable business practices. Demonstrating that economic prosperity, environmental health, and social well-being can grow together will set a powerful precedent for cities nationwide to move toward a sustainable future.

Leading the Way

The Way Cup program is a great fit for the City of Fort Collins’ sustainability team to implement citywide because it is proven to be a successful business model. Deposit Return Schemes (DRS) have been implemented in many European beverage containers. Aarhus, the second-largest city in Denmark, has developed automated machines that have been installed across the city. *Euronews.com* covered this story, and explained, “When a cup is returned to the machine, it automatically refunds to a person’s bank card”, simplifying the return process. The project has been successful so far, and the city is looking into expanding its to-go containers from beverage cups to plates, pizza boxes, and more. Additionally, the

implementation of the Way Cup program can contribute to keeping plastics out of the ocean, despite Fort Collins being landlocked. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), 80% of pollution to the marine environment comes from the land. Positioned next to the Cache La Poudre river, Fort Collins holds additional responsibility for keeping our waterways clean. While the Cache La Poudre River does not flow directly into the ocean, it does flow into the South Platte River, which does connect to the Missouri and ultimately, the Mississippi River. This means that every piece of litter in the Cache La Poudre River can end up in the Gulf of Mexico. Jim Gwinner, Mississippi Rivers Cities and Towns Initiative leader, estimates that approximately 11 million metric tons of plastic enters the oceans every year, with rivers contributing to a significant portion of that amount. Implementing the Way Cup program citywide not only aligns with Fort Collins' sustainability goals, but positions us as the clear leader in reducing plastic waste, supporting local businesses, and keeping our waterways clean.

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