

U.S. Carpet Recycling Is in the Dumps, Literally

By [Bill Sheehan, Executive Director](#) | [September 12, 2014](#)

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The Internet is a medium where anyone can say anything. Many people do. And sometimes when they do, it gets picked up and repeated by other people. In those cases it is always wise to check original sources.

Recently I came across a headline boasting “Carpet Recycling Jumps 52% in 2013.” The story was published on [triplepundit.com](#) and reprinted on at least a half-dozen other websites (I originally saw it in a newsletter published by the North American Hazardous Materials Management Association). The story referred to the [2013 Annual Report](#) by the Carpet America Recovery Effort (CARE), the industry association responsible for increasing carpet recovery in the United States.



Having participated in a year-long dialogue with the carpet industry several years ago I was eager to read about progress. The dialogue was convened by the carpet industry to get government regulators to bless a second carpet recycling goal ten years after the industry had failed miserably to meet a first voluntary goal.

In fact, the 2013 industry report said nothing about a 52% increase in recycling. Instead it reported an increase in *landfill diversion*. And half of what they reported as diverted from landfills was actually landfilled!

The CARE report shows that post-consumer carpet *recycling* (including reuse) in 2013 declined from 2012, from 8% to 5%. That recycling rate is the same as it was in 2006 (see [Report](#), Table 1, page 14).

What the report does show is an increase in the amount of post-consumer carpet that was burned (which of course is credited to “landfill diversion”). But the kicker is that CARE counts carpet that was collected for recycling but then sent to landfills as – believe it or not – “landfill diversion!” And this amount is greater than the total amount that was recycled.

Government stakeholders in the 2011 carpet dialogue were wise enough not to endorse a carpet industry recycling goal without provision of a financing mechanism – because recycling costs more than landfilling. Not only was the industry unwilling to support a financing mechanism, it has lobbied aggressively against state extended producer responsibility legislation which would provide such financing.

California passed the nation's first, and still only, carpet EPR law in 2010 to provide funding to increase carpet recycling. Why has California's law, which has been operational for two years, not increased the national recycling rate? After all California has 38 million people, which is more than 12% of the U.S. population.



The answer seems to be that CARE is doing the bare minimum in California. CARE gave fee money they collected to a company named Carpet Collectors which simply stockpiled carpet on an open lot. The operation was eventually closed by Sacramento County for health and safety violations and all the carpet ended up in California landfills. Meanwhile an operator in Los Angeles called the Carpet Recyclers could not secure enough carpet to process because of the advantages given by CARE to the Carpet Collectors. The Carpet Recyclers went bankrupt, laying off 75 workers.

Furthermore, there has been little or no public education. Consumers in most locations have no idea how to recycle carpet four years after the bill passed. Other issues are documented on the [CalRecycle website](#).

California's experience shows that effective EPR legislation needs strong government oversight to achieve meaningful results. The industry was dragged kicking and whining into California. They are demonstrating that they have little interest in increasing carpet recycling. Now it is up to government (regulators and legislators) to ensure that the industry does their share.

The 2013 CARE report reports that 95% of carpet discarded in 2013 in the U.S. was landfilled (93%) or burned (2%). That's 1.7 million tons of material made from nonrenewable fossil fuels. Considering growing climate disruption and the massive embedded energy in all that carpet, that's a big problem.



About Bill Sheehan, Executive Director

Dr. Sheehan is a policy expert and big picture thinker who has been at the forefront of two U.S. sustainability movements – Zero Waste and Extended Producer Responsibility – over the past two decades.