

**Making it Mandatory:  
Commercial Solid Waste Recycling in Rhode Island**

by

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**A.B., Brown University, 1992**

**Thesis**

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Arts  
in the Center for Environmental Studies  
at Brown University**

**May 1993**

## Abstract

The Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management (DEM) promulgated regulations in 1988 which require businesses to recycle a specified list of materials. To back the requirement, DEM has also required employers of more than 50 people to submit recycling plans, which are updated with annual reports. The reporting requirement was implemented over time, with employers of more than 500 people affected first, followed by firms with 251-500 employees, 101-250 employees, and 51-100 employees.

This thesis looks at the mandatory commercial recycling requirement as it has been implemented for businesses with more than 100 employees. I find that the program has been a success. The generators are recycling 34% of their waste, and the program has been particularly successful for certain materials: Waste paper recycling, for example, has increased a minimum of 54% as a result of the mandatory commercial recycling regulations.

The program has achieved its success without imposing a costly burden. Fifty-eight percent of the employers are saving money as a result of recycling, and 77% find that recycling does not impose a net cost. Haulers tend to resent the recycling requirement, yet admit that those who quickly offered comprehensive recycling services in addition to trash removal were able to gain new clients. Brokers complain mostly of flooded markets, a situation which, rather than being directly caused by Rhode Island's regulations, is part of a nationwide trend.

While Rhode Island's commercial recycling program has plenty of room for improvement, it is a model from which other jurisdictions can learn and should consider emulating. Mandatory recycling works.