

What a Provincial Circular Economy Strategy Can Mean for Communities

Local and Indigenous Leaders Sessions – Background

Current situation

The Province of BC has committed to developing a Circular Economy Strategy as part of its Clean BC plan. Thus far, solid waste planning has been primarily a responsibility of regional districts and First Nations, as the province has focused on supporting organics management and regulating Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs. BC is one of the two provinces in Canada without a comprehensive waste strategy. In the absence of a broader provincial strategy, the tools available to local and Indigenous governments can only go so far. UBCM resolutions have been passed calling for the province to develop a Zero Waste Strategy (2017) or a Circular Economy Strategy (2021).

What is Circular Economy or Zero Waste?

The concepts of Circular Economy (CE) and Zero Waste (ZW) are similar.

A **Circular Economy** is defined by the [Ellen MacArthur Foundation](#) as being designed for the principles of eliminating waste and pollution, circulating materials and products (at their highest value) and regenerating nature. It should be based on renewable energy and materials. The [butterfly diagram](#) below shows the circulation of biological and technical nutrients (along the lines of a waste hierarchy) and the need to avoid externalities of burning or burying waste.

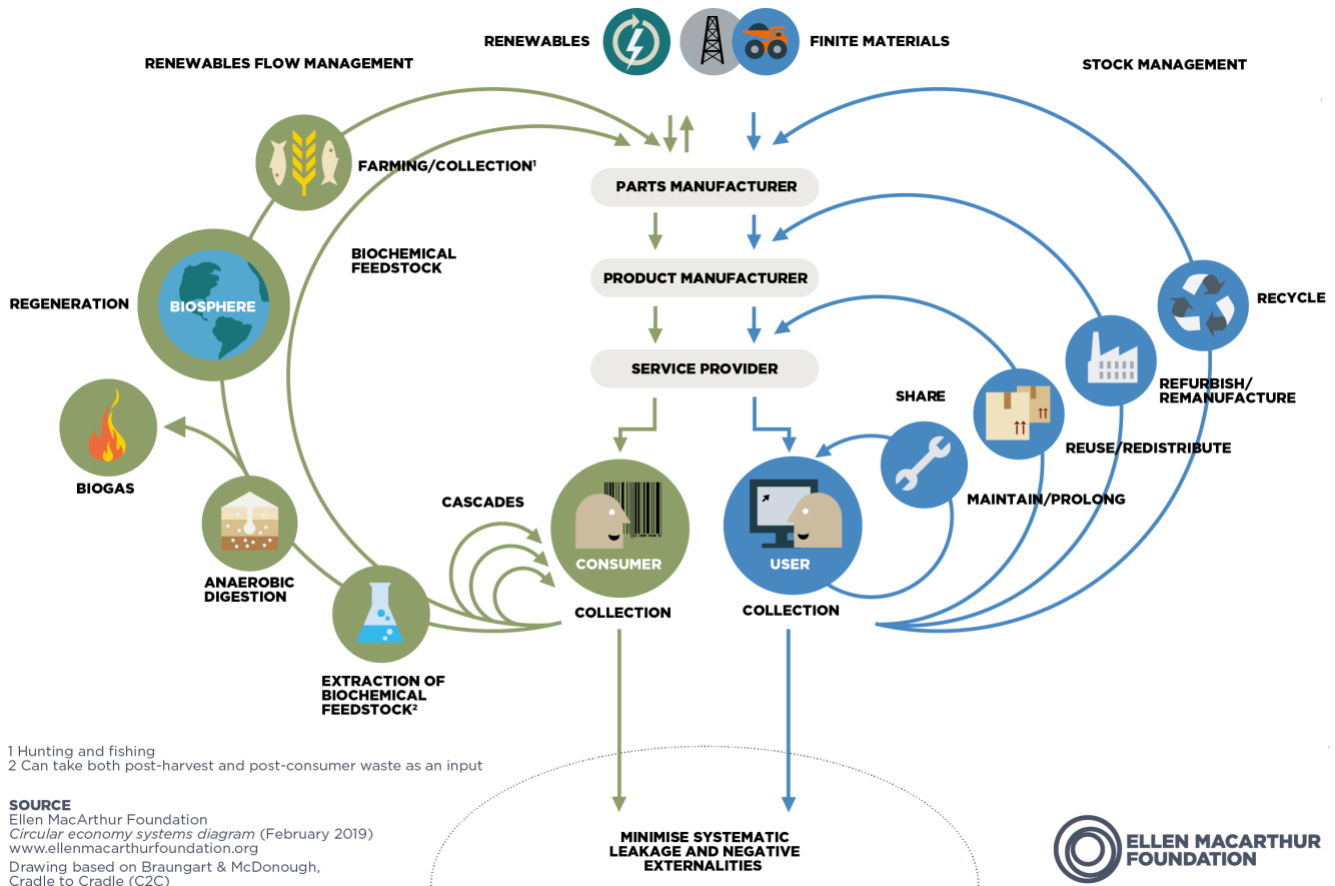


Figure 1: Circular Economy Butterfly Diagram (Source: Ellen Macarthur Foundation)

Zero Waste is defined as “the conservation of all resources by means of responsible production, consumption, reuse, and recovery of products, packaging, and materials without burning and with no discharges to land, water, or air that threaten the environment or human health.”¹ Zero waste policies place much greater emphasis on upstream, proactive solutions—rethinking systems, aggressive materials reduction, redesign and re-use *before* recycling and composting.

These concepts are similar in their goals to reduce waste by changing design and with elements of a hierarchy. The Zero Waste hierarchy is a good tool for waste planning as it shows which steps are preferable. This graphic shows the high level steps but the more detailed version found [here](#) outlines additional steps within each level.



Figure 2: Zero Waste Hierarchy
(Source: Zero Waste International Alliance)

Benefits of pursuing Zero Waste and a Circular Economy

There are numerous benefits from developing and implementing ZW and CE strategies. We collectively are using more resources than can be sustainably replenished and creating more wastes than can be absorbed by nature. The land use changes from extracting more natural resources for human consumption has led to the loss of habitats and biodiversity. Our collective [ecological footprint](#) is too large and growing. Every step in the supply chain takes energy, often with a large amount of greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions that are not fully accounted for. All products have an embodied GHG cost that is wasted when we fail to use the material or product for a long period of time or use it needlessly. Despite using an abundance of materials, equitable distribution of resources is also missing.

Many governments are recognizing consumption-based emissions as a problem that they need to take responsibility for. These consumption-based emission inventories (CBEIs) are being calculated for countries ([Sweden](#) being the first to consider reduction targets and [Scotland](#) using them for a campaign to decrease them) but also for local governments (for example, [Vancouver](#), [C40 Cities](#), [King County](#)) or just for sectors like the built environment. Not only are there the environmental benefits of less waste, less pollution, less litter, decreased habitat and species loss, slower loss of soil nutrients and decreased climate changing gases, but also social benefits as societies become more resilient, have more jobs, and have lower material throughput to meet their needs and economic benefits when the circular economy fosters more local and circular businesses. Momentum is growing with more and more [cities and regions](#) developing and implementing strategies.

What work has been done?

Municipalities have been developing plans for the local government scale and First Nations are developing tools and community programs but all levels of government need to work together. Zero Waste BC, in partnership with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, published a report [A Zero Waste Agenda for BC](#) which outlined the state of waste in BC as well as a proposed suite of actions that could help take BC to close to zero waste by 2040. Our research found that despite expansion and improvements in recycling and organics composting programs across BC from 2008-2018, the amount of waste disposed has been static. It

¹ Zero Waste International Alliance. “Zero Waste Definition.” July 2020. <http://zwia.org/zero-waste-definition/>.

shows that we need to work on changing our system and reducing and reusing the materials and products we use. When steps closer to the top of the ZW hierarchy are pursued, benefits increase - from less waste to more jobs, lower GHG emissions and fewer environmental impacts. In fact, GHG emissions across BC could be reduced by 7.1 million tonnes by 2040 through pursuing zero waste. To do that, we recommended these key directions for the province to enact:

- Develop a Zero Waste by 2040 Strategy
- Focus on redesign, innovation and shifting culture
- Ensure reduction and reuse are fundamental to the strategy
- Account for GHGs and ecosystem impacts
- Extend product lifespans
- Address Construction & Demolition waste and decrease plastics
- Develop a Crown Corporation to collect and manage flows where needed
- Create demand for recycled materials
- Gather better data and make it public
- Ensure there are green jobs and a just transition framework
- Eliminate energy recovery from waste and close disposal loopholes

This work built on the 2017 discussion paper developed by the Intermunicipal Working Group on Zero Waste, a BC-based group of local elected leaders who asked for a provincial Zero Waste Strategy. The eight key recommendations were to:

1. Develop and implement a Provincial Zero Waste Strategy
2. Enact measures to focus on the higher tiers of the zero waste hierarchy (reconsider, reduce, reuse)
3. Enhance existing Extended Producer Responsibility programs
4. Add new Extended Producer Responsibility programs
5. Reduce and compost organics
6. Work with specific sectors
7. Maximize use of existing disposal capacity and minimize environmental impacts
8. Advocate to the federal government for zero waste policy

The Climate Caucus Zero Waste /Circular Economy working group held a series of workshops in 2020 resulting in information for councillors in the [Councillors Handbook](#) and the creation of a [municipal toolkit](#).

As First Nations communities are not covered by regional district and provincial waste planning systems (though they may connect or interact with these systems), they are developing their own tools and programs for their communities. First Nations traditional worldviews and practices shun waste and show respect for the resources that nature provides. The [Indigenous Zero Waste Technical Advisory Group](#) is leading many of the efforts to enhance systems and work to address the waste created by our current take-make-waste linear economy.

The Opportunity

Local elected leaders, Indigenous leaders and staff working on zero waste and circular economy strategies and actions will have seen where their jurisdiction and sphere of influence bumps up with what needs to be done at a provincial or even national level. It is these experiences, ideas and issues that we wish to discuss to develop a brief in anticipation of the development of the BC Circular Economy Strategy. While the provincial engagement plan to develop the strategy is not yet known, it is important to ensure that the voices of local governments and Indigenous governments, *the community-level*, is represented. Your attendance at one of these sessions will assist us in hearing from your experience and developing this brief to present to the Ministry.