



2023 Campus Race to Zero Waste Case Study University of Southern California

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Focus of Case study:

To help achieve our Zero Waste goal, USC enacted a policy prohibiting the use of single-use plastic beverage bottles from all university events and operations.

Detailed description of campaign or effort:

The University of Southern California (USC) established the [Single-use Plastics Elimination – Beverage Bottles Policy](#) in July 2022, prohibiting the purchase or use of single-use plastic beverage products across the university. Development of the policy was a multi-year process involving a broad coalition of university stakeholders, third party partners, and community members working together to establish the policy's scope, compliance framework, implementation plan, and ongoing enforcement and maintenance. This collaborative effort enabled USC to develop broad awareness of the policy as participants identified potential obstacles, established oversight measures, and created compliance pathways specific to USC's diverse campus partners and locations.

Goals

- Develop tailored pathways to transition away from single-use plastics as needed for diverse groups of campus stakeholders, and identify products and suppliers that can be utilized.
- Prioritize source reduction through reusable alternatives wherever possible
- Transition to more sustainable product alternatives wherever single-use items were unavoidable
- Ensure widespread policy awareness and buy-in from all USC community members
- Establish compliance support system and metrics for progress reporting
- Develop processes for "essential" single-use plastic beverage products due to safety, accessibility, and health related concerns
- Develop resources to aid units and departments in successfully making the transition
- Ensure equitable compliance roll-out and enforcement, with support systems in place to address individual stakeholder group needs

By focusing on these aspects during policy development, USC has experienced remarkable success in the elimination of single-use plastic beverage products on campus properties and throughout its operations.

Planning steps & timeline to implement:

- 2018: USC begins discussions around single-use plastic elimination with major university entities.
- 2019: During inaugural address, USC President Carol Folt expresses a commitment to reduce plastic waste/use at the university.
- 2021: Major USC purchasing entities begin a multiyear negotiation with campus beverage pouring rights holder and bottling distributor, which prioritizes the elimination of single-use plastic products.
- 2022: USC critical stakeholders establish policy advisory committee, and begin yearlong policy development process. Seven major stakeholders develop the initial draft of policy with over 30 USC entities participating in comment periods and multiple rounds of revisions.
- April 2022: USC President and Chief Sustainability Officer release university-wide message announcing policy will go into effect in July 2022.

- July 2022: USC's Single-use Plastics Elimination – Beverage Bottles Policy is published and goes into effect.
- November 2022: USC celebrates the milestone of preventing over 1 million single-use plastic bottles from entering the campus waste stream since the policy's release.
- April 2023: USC milestone of over 1.5 million single-use plastic bottles avoided from entering USC's waste stream.

Planning and Development: University stakeholders were invited by the Single-Use Plastic Beverage Bottle Elimination Policy Advisory Committee to review and share feedback on the draft policy throughout its development. High-level administrative buy-in helped to recruit participation among various key entities, including purchasing groups, waste operations, and other sustainability stakeholders throughout the broader USC community. All of the received feedback was then addressed either by policy framework revisions or the creation of support systems and compliance tools. Specific measures included:

- **Ensuring availability of alternatives for campus resale:** Through negotiation with campus beverage providers, and establishment of the pouring rights contract, single-use plastic beverage products were replaced with alternatives made from aluminum or glass at all vending machines, retail, hospitality, and university event services.
- **Ensuring availability of alternatives for campus use:** For uses not covered by the pouring rights contract, compliant products and purchasing sources were identified by Procurement, to provide all university stakeholders with preferred suppliers and catalog purchasing sources. Specific product suggestions and reusable service options were also identified to fit special needs and financial limitations.
- **Ensuring broad university collaboration and feedback:** The initial advisory committee held multiple meetings with an expanding group of stakeholders, and held open comment periods for each policy draft to address all feedback received. The advisory committee grew from an initial committee of seven stakeholders to over 40 groups taking part in a town hall meeting, with an additional public forum held to solicit feedback from the broader community.
- **Tailoring compliance pathways:** Transition pathways and timelines for compliance were developed for an array of stakeholders, categorized as: beverage resale entities, schools, administration, leased property tenants, or off-campus purchasers. The limitations faced by these groups included their location; previously established procurement, sponsorship and lease agreements; and the inability to actively enforce purchases. These considerations were addressed with a phased roll-out, policy transition plan, and a procedure for temporary exemption procedure.
- **Establishing compliance procedure for temporary exemptions:** A [Beverage Bottles Policy Transition Request Form](#) allowed individual entities to submit a request for the temporary use of a single-use plastic product. These requests were assessed by the Office of Sustainability (OoS) and granted approval if inventory was previously purchased and needed to be exhausted, or if there was an immediate and unavoidable need for plastic products. In both cases an entity would need to demonstrate good faith actions were taken to secure alternatives and a transition plan developed, and the group would later be followed up with to confirm a successful transition was made.
- **Identifying “essential” single-use plastic items:** “Essential” single-use plastic beverage bottle products were defined within the policy as products that are necessary for health or accessibility purposes (such as certain medical nutrition products only available in plastic bottles), where no reasonable alternatives are available. Members of the USC community report these instances to OoS with the Beverage Bottles Policy Transition Request Form to determine if temporary or long-term policy exceptions should be granted. Entities granted a long-term product exemption are required to provide distribution details and an ongoing commitment to continue searching for alternatives in the marketplace as they become readily available.
- **University-wide awareness campaign:** Partnerships between Central Communications, Sustainability, Housing and Hospitality, Athletics, and Event Planning teams were established to raise awareness campus wide. This messaging was often tailored for specific high-visibility touchpoints, such as at sporting events,

and included digital signage, website messaging, education resources, USC News and student publications, and a roadshow presentation prescribed for key stakeholders.

- **Policy support, tools and resources for all stakeholder groups:** Working with entities such as Student Affairs, environmental student groups, USC Real Estate, Events, Facilities Management, the Office of Business Diversity and Economic Opportunity, a [website and toolkit](#) were developed and went live upon policy launch. Resources created included awareness and education graphics, FAQs, compliance checklists, and designated contacts for additional assistance (see Appendix for links to resources).
- **Ongoing compliance, enforcement, and tracking systems:** Purchasing groups, sustainability stakeholders, and waste management are tasked with ongoing compliance oversight. Purchasing groups identify single-use plastic product purchases, waste management monitors disposal in the waste stream on campus, and the Office of Sustainability (OoS) assesses reported issues and responds to violations. A [violation report form](#) was also established so that USC community members can anonymously report non-compliance to OoS, with updates provided upon request.
- **Policy Roll-out:** By July 2022, the bottling distributor had successfully replaced all single-use plastic resale beverage products with compliant alternatives across campuses. Groups with stock purchased prior to July 2022 were permitted to exhaust their inventory by submitting a request and receiving approval from the Office of Sustainability.

Schools and Administrative units were offered Preferred Catalog Suppliers for sourcing non-plastic alternatives. USC Village food and retail venues, product suppliers, and lease holders under previously established contracts were expected to begin transitioning away from single-use plastic beverages immediately, with enforcement occurring on an individual basis upon lease or contract renewal.

Entities that identified “essential products” critical to their operations, where no feasible alternative existed, were provided approval of transition plans upon assessment by the Office of Sustainability. Long-term exemptions were only granted for instances involving health and accessibility products with no suitable alternative available in the marketplace, but with commitments to continue searching for suitable replacements.

Working with the Office of Business Diversity and Economic Opportunity, and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, specific resources, events, and speaking engagements were established to ensure local and diverse university suppliers were prepared for policy compliance. Examples of support resources can be found in the Resources section.

The Office of Sustainability continues to develop and provide policy awareness resources and compliance tools in the form of written guidance, visual graphics, and speaking engagements targeted to specific stakeholder groups both within the university and to external partners, as well as upon request.

Both monitoring and enforcement continue to ensure ongoing compliance, with the transition period closing in July 2023. Policy enforcement continues based upon entity type, compliance pathway, and phased roll-out implementation, with enforcement continuing on an ongoing basis. Tracking of the policy’s impact occurs on a quarterly basis, with standard metrics to evaluate effectiveness, identify opportunities for policy expansion, as well as potential issues to address through enforcement or policy revisions. Tracking processes include:

- Documenting feedback from the USC community, received through the policy support website, speaking engagements, and from policy stakeholders.
- Comparing pre/post policy beverage product purchase records, to measure reduction in single-use beverage product purchases
- Tracking usage and refill rate (where possible) of reusable alternatives introduced to campus, to help quantify single-use plastic beverage bottles replaced with refillable alternatives

- Quantifying single-use plastic beverage product alternatives both purchased by USC for resale through beverage pouring rights contract and by USC staff using USC Preferred and Recommended Suppliers purchasing portals. These suppliers account for the vast majority of beverage purchases from university departments.

Resources and stakeholders involved:

This effort was a presidential priority to advance university sustainability goals, with policy roll-out financed by multiple university stakeholders. The total cost of the policy roll-out was not tracked, but expenses include: staff labor hours, purchase of sustainable alternatives at a cost premium, hydration station infrastructure installations and retrofits, and collateral materials for awareness and engagement campaigns.

Stakeholders involved included:

- Office of Sustainability
- Auxiliary Services (Housing, Dining and Hospitality)
- SC Athletics
- Facilities Planning and Management (Waste and Landscape)
- Office of Culture, Ethics and Compliance
- Office of Business Diversity and Economic Opportunity
- Office for Equity, Equal Opportunity and Title IX
- Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Keck Medical Center Support Services
- Real Estate
- Procurement
- Business Services
- Cultural Relations and University Events
- Undergraduate Student Government
- University Communications
- Administrative Operations
- Graduate Student Government
- Student Affairs
- Office of the General Counsel
- Office of the Provost
- Office of the President
- Environmental Student Assembly
- Staff Assembly
- Individual faculty, staff, students
- Major event venues, including LA Memorial Coliseum and Galen Center

Describe the Results of this campaign component:

- **General results:**
 - Presidential support
 - multiple student and university press coverage
 - numerous events and training to help local community partners prepare and transition to sustainable alternatives
 - The policy has received generally positive feedback from students, faculty, staff, and third-party vendors
 - Aluminum alternatives are offered at all retail locations, Housing, Dining, and vending machines across both University Park Campus and Health Science Campus
 - Elimination of single-use plastic beverage products from major events held on USC campus, including all SC Trojan Football games

- Experiential learning opportunities have been established to help increase the rate of refillable options on campus
- **Specific measurable impact:**
 - As of April 2023 USC has prevented over 1.5 million single-use plastic beverage bottles from entering the campus waste stream through university purchases of aluminum or glass alternatives
 - Over 6,500 single-use plastic beverage bottles were avoided with the transition to reusable/refillable alternative SodaStream
 - An estimated 11,000 single-use plastic beverage bottles per month have been avoided through USC Preferred and Recommended Suppliers
 - Reduction of about 20,000 single-use plastic beverage product purchases per month, compared to pre-policy purchase rates (this cannot solely be attributed to policy, due to lower campus populations from COVID measures across campus)

What would you do differently in the future?

- **Expanding Reuse**
 - Install additional hydration stations on campus as permanent infrastructure improvements
 - Offer temporary water refill stations for large events either through external vendor partnerships or the purchase of equipment to be leased by Hospitality or Event Services
 - Install soda and beverage dispensers across food retail locations
 - Offer reusable cups and mugs for university events
 - Increase outreach and engagement efforts to promote the use of reuse products
- **Policy Expansion**
 - Increase scope of policy to encompass single-use plastic service ware
 - Mandate reusables and prohibit all single-use items, whether compostable or recyclable
- **Mitigate Costs**
 - Offer subsidies and other financial mechanisms to assist USC groups and community members struggling with policy compliance
 - Establish beverage supplier agreements and product sourcing that provides bulk purchasing discounts to individual student groups, offices, and departments
 - Use increased commodity rebates for aluminum materials to subsidize or reimburse USC entities purchasing aluminum beverage products

What advice would you give to another college that wanted to do a similar effort?

- Broad university collaboration and diverse feedback allowed the university to identify and design solutions for unforeseen obstacles. By adjusting the policy transition roadmap and policy text based on the wide range of feedback received during policy development, the university was able to “socialize” the policy, negate stakeholder opposition, and avoid specific stakeholders, such as retail partners, local vendors, or student organizations, from being unfairly impacted.
- Developing specific compliance pathways and tailoring best practices for a variety of stakeholders was particularly important when addressing partners with vastly different needs, such as: those currently under contract or lease or those who needed to exhaust previously-purchased inventory, or campus guests and community members who bring externally purchased plastic beverages to campus. Identifying unique campus stakeholders and partners was found to be key for replicating policy implementation success, recognizing the value of these stakeholders’ involvement in future sustainable policy development.
- While USC has control over beverage products purchased for resale through the pouring rights contract, it was critical to develop monitoring and enforcement procedures for instances where USC cannot control or track purchases, with outside products being brought to campus. By providing access to a violation reporting tool, policy owners are able to receive and issue out-of-compliance notifications and escalate continued non-compliance.

- By integrating racial equity and social justice concerns into the planning process, and partnering with USC’s Office of Business Diversity and Economic Opportunity, and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, USC has been able to identify and support groups who may have been disproportionately impacted by this policy. By offering individualized consultation and planning resources to impacted groups, Office of Sustainability staff have been able to address inequities for groups who may struggle financially to comply with the policy and external partners who may be new to these types of measures. Efforts to work with local vendors have helped prepare them to continue business operations with USC, gain a competitive advantage in the outside marketplace, and stay ahead of future regulations from the City of LA and State of California.
- In order to design the parameters of this policy, it was critical to identify suppliers and product sources to ensure availability of alternatives for all groups. This helped to identify material shortages in the marketplace, such as a temporary aluminum canned Powerade scarcity, and to develop temporary solutions.
- Even with negotiated pouring rights and preferred supplier agreements, with aluminum beverage products still relatively new to the marketplace and more expensive to produce than plastic, end users have seen about a 2-3x increase in price for aluminum water products compared to single-use plastic products. To help mitigate this financial impact, we have identified and recommended less expensive alternatives, such as canned water products. The price increase has also presented the opportunity to make the case for reusable containers and prioritize refillable options, including: campus hydration stations and water fountains, counter-top filtration and conditioning systems, 5-gallon office coolers, dining and catering options with beverage dispensers.
- The process of identifying “essential” products and allowing exemptions as needed ensures that entities are not unfairly penalized for items that are unavoidable and serve a critical function, including nutrition, medical, accessibility, or safety.
- To evaluate the overall impact of this policy and report updates across the university, it was imperative to establish various metrics of success. This allowed the university to break down single-use plastic reductions into product replacement statistics, as well as single-use plastic aversion that occurred through the transition to reusable options. This documenting and reporting of the policy’s impact also helps to justify potential expansions or future policies at USC. Departments involved in these ongoing policy impact assessments include departments that can track university purchases, such as Auxiliary Services, Procurement, and Business Services. Additionally, FPM Waste monitors campus waste streams to identify any instances of single-use plastic beverage product disposal, and refills at campus hydration stations. Lastly, as the policy owner and enforcement entity, the Office of Sustainability keeps records of violations, essential single-use plastic products in circulation, and bottles avoided to date.
- Assessing policy impact, and the prioritization of reusable alternatives, has also led to innovative experiential learning opportunities, including a project where students mapped campus hydration stations in GIS, and a follow up group will now provide formal recommendations for locations to install additional hydration stations.
- Having the backing and commitment of the University President and Chief Sustainability Officer allowed USC to recruit stakeholders who may not have otherwise agreed to participate in the policy development process. This leadership support also enabled USC to set high goals and clear enforcement expectations that have largely been adhered to without having to resort to punitive measures.

Appendix

Policy compliance forms and tools

- [USC Single-Use Plastics Elimination – Beverage Bottles Policy Transition Request Form](#)
- [Policy Compliance Toolkit](#)

- [Policy Violation Reporting Form](#)

Policy awareness tools

- [FAQ's Sheet](#)
- [Policy Webpage](#)
- [Assignment: Earth 2028 Sustainability Framework](#)
- [Policy text](#)

Photos and Graphics:



