

Coalition asking for recycled materials mandate for Ontario infrastructure

By Adam Freill January 14, 2025

A coalition of Ontario civil infrastructure leaders, builders, suppliers and engineers has launched a campaign to urge government leaders to adopt policy changes to increase sustainability in the construction of public infrastructure projects.

The group says a government mandate to include just 20 per cent of recycled crushed aggregates (RCA) for critical construction projects like roads, subdivisions, highways, bridges and tunnels could save local governments more than \$260 million, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by an amount equivalent to removing 15 million cars from the road annually.

“Recycled aggregates are cost-effective, sustainable and high-performing, and can help municipalities deliver more from their capital plans while helping to reach their net-zero targets,” said Raly Chakarova, executive director of the Toronto and Area Road Builders Association (TARBA). “Using more recycled materials in construction projects can preserve non-renewable resources, reduce waste and traffic congestion, and contribute to long-term sustainability.”

RCA is made from reclaimed concrete and asphalt that would otherwise end up in landfills. TARBA explains that adding it to upcoming infrastructure projects would offer significant economic advantages for municipalities struggling to address a growing state of good repair backlog and the infrastructure investments needed to keep up with population growth.

Extensive testing has shown RCA to be as high-performing as primary aggregate, and RCA already has a proven track record in Ontario, where it has been used in the province’s 400-series highways, at Pearson International Airport, in transit projects, as well as in house-enabling infrastructure projects in subdivisions in the Greater Toronto Area.

“The use of RCA can significantly contribute to the carbon reduction of new concrete used to build our homes, roadways, bridges and other critical building infrastructure,” stated Bart Kanters, president of Concrete Ontario. “The use of RCA in producing unshrinkable Fill [U-Fill] and concrete mud slabs has contributed significantly to environmental sustainability over the past decade. With the update of the CSA A23.1/.2 Concrete standard at the end of 2024, the concrete industry can now utilize up to 30 per cent RCA as a replacement for virgin coarse aggregates in an extensive amount of concrete applications.”

Around the world, governments are incentivizing the use of RCA through policies and regulations that accelerate the shift toward sustainable construction materials. A coalition of nine industry organizations, including Concrete Ontario, Good Roads, the Greater Toronto Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, Heavy Civil Association of Toronto, Ontario Road Builders Association, Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO), Ontario Sand, Stone, and Gravel Association, Ontario Society of Professional Engineers, and TARBA, is advocating for municipal and provincial decision-makers to take the lead in Ontario in an effort to maximize RCA's economic and environmental benefits.

The group is asking for municipalities in the province to include the use of RCA in tenders for construction projects, mandating a minimum amount of RCA for all public infrastructure projects, and that municipal specifications for RCA be standardized through provincial standards.

At the provincial level, the coalition is calling on government to incentivize the use of RCA through funding for municipal infrastructure projects. The coalition is also asking the province to prohibit municipalities from specifying "primary-only" in public infrastructure tenders, while harmonizing municipal specifications for RCA through provincial standards and mandating the use of a minimum of 20 per cent RCA for all municipal, regional and provincial public infrastructure projects.

While asphalt and concrete are 100 per cent recyclable, and 180 million tonnes of aggregates are used in Ontario annually, less than seven per cent of those aggregates come from recycled sources, and most of that use can be attributed to the Ontario Ministry of Transportation's construction and expansion of the 400-series of highways. Municipalities are the largest aggregate consumers in the province, using between 60 and 70 million tonnes a year.

"Increasing the use of RCA is a great and tangible way for the construction industry to improve sustainability and help the environment," stated Nadia Todorova, executive director at RCCAO. "The Ministry of Transportation's leadership in adopting recycled crushed aggregates demonstrates their commitment to innovation and environmental stewardship, and we urge municipalities across Ontario to follow their example. Together, we can build durable, high-performing infrastructure that supports our communities and the environment."

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