Surfing the Shift to a Circular Economy:

What reuse can teach us about community, resilience and systems change

Crystal Dreisbach, CEO, Upstream

RCA's 2026 Circular Economy Conference · Oct 22, 2026

Upstream



A big claim

Reuse (pretty much) solves all of society's problems.

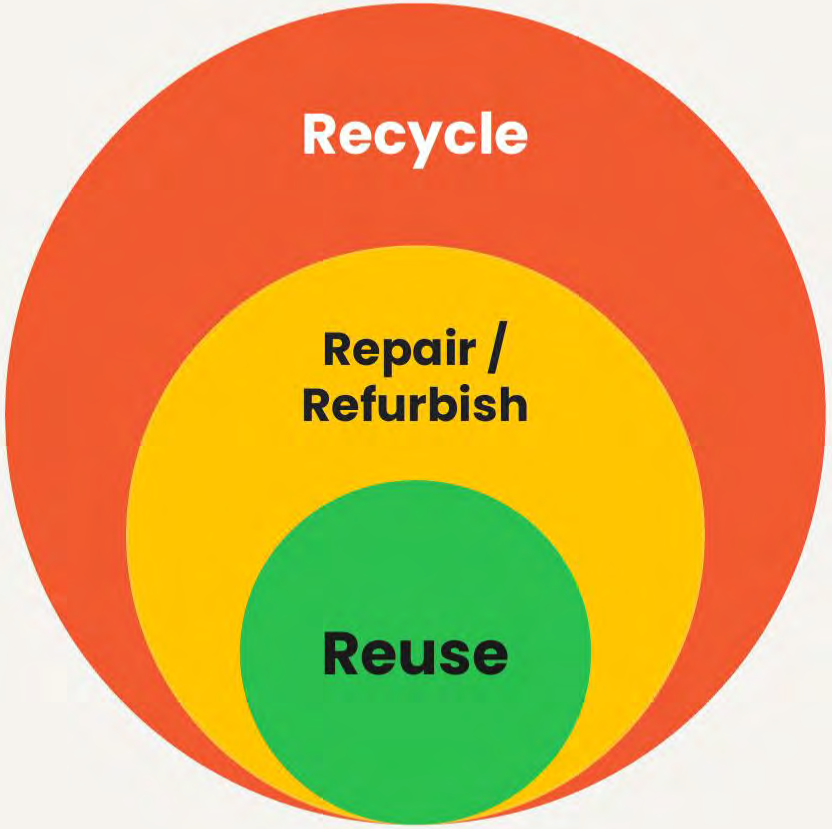
Resilience. Local value. Joy.



Circular economy: keeping things in use

Linear economy

Take › Make › Waste



Upstream

The tighter the loop, the more value we keep.

Recycling: an essential loop



Reuse is the inner loop



Single-use = long supply chains



Reusable = short supply chains



What do shorter supply chains mean for community and the economy?



Local jobs

Washing, logistics, and repair stay in town



Money stays local

Dollars circulate here, not overseas



Shock-proof supply

The stock is already here when shipping stalls or prices spike



Shared assets

Containers a community owns and trusts together

Reuse keeps value, jobs, and resilience close to home.

Upstream

Reuse only works inside a system



Your story is our model.

Upstream



The ReCirculation Project

Can recycling help carry reuse?

Curbside → MRF → RFID sort

City + Sonoco + Duke Univ.

New revenue for recyclers

Upstream

Building reuse the way we built recycling

Upstream's three pillars

1

Enabling policy

2

Funding and financing

3

Normalizing reuse

Upstream

Pillar 1: An enabling policy environment

Two kinds of reuse policy. Do both.

Make single-use harder

+

Create demand for reuse



Upstream


Creating an enabling policy environment
Growing & supporting the reuse industry
Normalizing reuse

Upstream's policy tracker

What cities and provinces are doing

Find it at upstreamsolutions.org/policy-tracker

4	Policy Name	Jurisdiction	State / Province	Jurisdiction Type	Accessories on Request	Cup/Container Charge	Reuse at Events	Reuse in Lodging
5	Chapter 5.26: Sustainable Foodware Ordinance	Albany	California	City	☑	☑	☐	☐
6	Chapter 6.13: Disposable Foodware Items	Alhambra	California	City	☑	☐	☐	☐
7	Chapter 3.5: Waste Reduction	Arcata	California	City	☑	☑	☐	☐
8	Chapter 8.56 - Disposable Food Service Ware	Atherton	California	City	☑	☐	☐	☐
9	Chapter 8.24 - Disposable Food Service Ware and Waste Reduction	Bainbridge Island	Washington	City	☑	☐	☐	☐

Upstream

Pillar 2: Mobilizing capital

Policy creates the tailwinds. Money is its own beast.

EPR & local gov. grants

Philanthropy

Investment

For the nuts and bolts:

Come to the 1:30 PM reuse panel talk in Temple C!

Upstream

Pillar 3: Normalizing reuse



Normalizing reuse: more showing than telling.

Upstream



Seeing it changes everything.

Photo: Re:Dish NYC wash hub, Brooklyn. Source: true.gbci.org/redish-nyc

Upstream

They saw it. Then they built it.

Charlotte, North Carolina city leaders:

2017: Saw circular communities in Spain and the Netherlands

2018: first US city to have a circular economy strategy



Upstream

Seeing comes first.

Heard at Climate Week NYC

What we need right now is courage.



Pick one pillar. Do one thing.

Enabling policy
Support new markets

Funding and financing
Back one business model

Normalizing reuse
See one. Bring someone.

Collection, sorting, logistics? Let's talk.

Ripples become a wave.

Upstream

The wave is building.
Let's catch it together.



Crystal Dreisbach, CEO, Upstream

Upstream