



Where Do My Recyclables Go?

Fact Sheet

What happens after the recycling workers dump recyclables into the truck and drive away? Do they really get recycled? Believe it or not, the materials go through an amazing sorting process and then become "new products". This fact sheet describes the recycling process and offers tips on how to close the recycling loop and help keep recycling markets healthy.

The Recycling Process

The materials collected by your hauler are transported to a processing center for sorting. Processing centers use various methods for separating the cardboard, paper, bottles and cans. First, the materials are loaded onto conveyor belts where a special screen removes the cardboard. Paper is separated from the plastic, metal and glass containers by screens and then manually sorted by workers into various types of paper (such as newspaper, office paper). Then, special machines are used to sort the different glass, metal and plastic containers. For example, a magnet separates the steel cans and a reverse magnet separates the aluminum cans. Glass is separated out in a machine called a trammel and plastics are sorted visually by processing center workers or optical sorters.



Plastic Containers

After the recyclables are separated, they are bound into a large bundle, commonly referred to as a bale. A bale of aluminum cans will weigh approximately 1,000 lbs. and can contain over 31,000 cans. These bales are sold and shipped to companies throughout the world where the materials are made into new products. For example, at one company, plastic bottles are made into synthetic fibers which become eco-fleece jackets.

Aluminum cans are made into new aluminum cans, which are shipped back to stores where customers purchase them the first time. Aluminum cans are actually able to be back in the stores in six weeks!



Aluminum Cans

The Recycling Market

The work of collecting, sorting, and processing recycled materials only benefits the environment if those materials are manufactured into new products; however, that won't happen unless there's a market for those new goods. Like any commodity, the market for recycled materials fluctuates due to a variety of factors. The reality of recycling is sometimes there is not a market for certain recycled materials. With no revenue or profit from their collected recycled materials, recyclers are sometimes forced to stockpile for future use or landfill their recycled materials until a market for them develops.



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Tips on Buying Recycled Products

How can you help keep the recycled material market healthy and growing? Buy recycled products! Buying recycled products supports local recycling programs by creating markets for the collected materials while also conserving natural resources and reducing solid waste, greenhouse gases and air and water pollutants. The variety of products made from recycled materials is continually expanding. Consumers can find recycled products for their homes, offices, autos, and gardens. Look for these symbols when shopping:

RECYCLABLE: The material can be recycled into a new product after its use in the home or office. An item is not truly recyclable if it can't be collected for recycling in your community.



RECYCLED: At least part of the material in a product was used before, so that some part of the product is not made from virgin sources.

POST-CONSUMER MATERIAL: Material that has been used by consumers or businesses, put into a recycling bin, and remanufactured into new product.

PRE-CONSUMER OR POST-INDUSTRIAL MATERIAL: Materials left over from the manufacturing process and re-used in the same plant.

Additional Resources for Buying Recycled Products

These websites offer information and guidance on how and where to buy a wide variety of products made from recycled materials.

- Chicago Recycling Coalition - www.chicagorecycling.org
- Solid Waste Authority of Lake County - www.lcswmd.com
- Californian Integrated Waste Management Board - www.ciwmb.ca.gov/RCP/
- Earth 911 - www.earth911.com