

Recycle Right NC Factsheet

Use these facts to support conversations with citizens, press, elected officials and decision makers or to draft your own versions of press releases or letters to the editor.

Important Recycling Truths

- Single-stream recycling is here to stay. It yields the highest participation, reduces worker safety hazards and delivers efficiency in the most expensive part of the recycling system: collection.
- Recycling:
 - Creates jobs.
 - Returns valuable resources (and their embodied energy) to beneficial use.
 - Preserves virgin materials.
 - Saves energy and water, and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.
 - Conserves landfill space.

What Happened with China

- In January 2018, China banned the import of mixed paper and mixed plastic.
- In March 2018, China enacted quality standards requiring that loads of sorted recyclables may not exceed 0.5 percent contamination.
- Now, there is a supply-and-demand issue. There is an abundance of recyclable materials in the United States market, causing the value of these materials to drop.
- China has not ruined recycling in America, as recent headlines claim. It is shining a light on some long-standing issues and much-needed improvements to our recycling programs.
 - Recycling bins contain too much trash.
 - The public is confused by conflicting and changing accepted materials lists and the lack of consistent recycling messaging.
 - Sustained education and enforcement campaigns are effective and necessary for people to recycle right and decrease contamination.
 - Domestic markets for recycling are a necessity and must be further developed.

Actions Needed NOW

- Reduce the amount of trash and non-recyclables (contamination) in the recycling stream. Contamination decreases the quality and value; plus, removing and sending contaminants to the landfill adds cost. On average, contamination makes up 14 percent of incoming recycling loads in North Carolina.
- Align messaging with others in your region who use the same material recovery facility (MRF).
- Use education and outreach to reduce contamination. The Recycling Partnership executed educational campaigns paired with enforcement (cart tagging) to achieve 57 percent contamination reduction in Atlanta and 47 percent contamination reduction in Chicago. **We can do the same here in North Carolina.**
- Reduce single use. Many single-use products (disposable cups, straws, lids or to-go containers) are not recyclable.
- Buy products with recycled content to help build demand.
- Keep moving forward. The current system of collecting mixed recyclables is the most cost-effective way of hauling and transporting materials, yields the most participation and allows residents to comply with the state's ban on landfilling aluminum cans and plastic bottles. Americans love to recycle; removing the service comes with considerable and extended public relations challenges.



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Recycling: By the Numbers

- In FY2017-18, North Carolina recycled 545,282 tons of traditional recyclables (bottles, cans, cardboard, paper) through local government programs. That equates to 106 pounds recycled per person.
- As of March 2019, one ton of single-stream (mixed) recycling is worth \$49.43. The average landfill disposal tipping fee costs \$43.30 per ton.
- North Carolina is home to more than 670 recycling companies employing more than 16,700 people with an average hourly wage of \$19.64 and estimated annual payroll of \$664 million.
- North Carolina is home to more than 60 manufacturers that rely on recycled material for feedstock to make new products. These companies employ more than 14,000 workers with total annual sales of more than \$4 billion.
- Recyclers are investing in upgrades and equipment to expand processing capacity. Seventeen companies were awarded a total of \$511,000 in Recycling Business Development Grants in 2019, spurring an additional private investment of \$1.3 million, creating 38 jobs and expected to divert an additional 8.1 million tons from landfill disposal.
- The Division of Environmental Assistance and Customer Service (DEACS) in the Department of Environmental Quality actively works with the Economic Development Partnership of North Carolina to recruit and grow recycling industry businesses.
- Domestic demand for recycled material is growing. Investments are being made by American, Chinese and other international companies, but building new facilities takes time. Recent announcements include:
 - Polywood, a manufacturer that recycles plastic milk jugs into durable outdoor furniture, began operations at a new production campus in Roxboro, N.C. in early 2019. The company is investing \$35.3 million into the facility, expects to create 384 jobs and will consume up to 40 million pounds of recycled plastic each year.
 - Nationwide, 16 paper mills have announced plans for construction, expansion or conversion to use recycled cardboard and mixed paper. These announcements reflect an investment of more than \$1 billion, and include projects in the southeast states of Kentucky, Virginia and South Carolina.

True Costs of Recycling

- A local government recycling program is a service provided to residents and customers. That service has an associated cost, just like other services (trash pickup, utilities).
- There has always been a cost to process recyclables, but it used to be offset by the revenue generated from the sales of recyclables. With current market conditions, the average value of one ton of mixed recyclables is \$43 and the cost to process is \$70. Recycling now comes at a cost, just like landfiling and all other solid waste management options. **Reducing levels of contamination lowers the cost of recycling.**
- Quotes from Will Sagar, Southeast Recycling Development Council:
 - “Recycling is not free. Rather it’s an investment in significant job creation. Materials lost to disposal will never add to the state’s economic strength. Recycling in communities should be considered a valuable public service, just like schools, highways and utilities.”
 - “The immediate cost of capturing recycling may not be as cheap as just sending it to a landfill, but the long-term economic benefits of the material to the economy far outweigh the costs to collect and process. The benefits are clear.”

