

State of Recycling in the District - 2019 FAQ

Recycling is an ever-changing industry. With many recent changes in the global and regional recycling markets, the Department of Public Works' Office of Waste Diversion developed these FAQs to explain how the recycling industry is evolving and how it's impacting the District of Columbia.

How does residential recycling collection work in DC today?

The Department of Public Works (DPW) collects DC's residential recycling and takes the material to either the Fort Totten or Benning Road transfer stations, where it is staged for transport to Waste Management's Recycle America material recovery facility (MRF) in Elkridge, MD. Once recyclables arrive at the MRF, they are sorted, aggregated into bales and then sold as a commodity to be processed and recycled into new products. Republic Service's MRF in Manassas, VA serves as a back-up facility for processing DC's recyclables.

Why is the U.S. facing challenges to its recycling programs?

While there are many domestic markets for recyclables in the US, countless cities and towns have historically exported recyclables such as paper and plastics outside of the US to countries with strong demand for recycled materials. In recent years, China has been the world's largest purchaser of recyclables and has purchased large quantities of recyclables from communities across the US.

Beginning in 2018, China moved to restrict the import of many kinds of recyclables, which effectively eliminated the strong market many US municipalities had relied on for years. China chose to restrict imports for many reasons; however, one of the reasons is the amount of contamination that came along with the recyclables. US domestic recycling markets generally face similar challenges with contamination. Some of the recyclable material that was being exported to China has since been directed to other international markets, such as India and some is being processed domestically. As a result of these global changes, there has been increased investment in infrastructure in the US to process recyclables. While the outlook is optimistic for recycling infrastructure in the US to upgrade and adapt to these changes, there are challenges ahead. A significant number of communities may struggle to find buyers and new end markets for many types of recyclables. We need to decrease contamination and increase the resilience of recycling programs.

How do challenges to U.S. recycling affect recycling in the Washington Metropolitan Region?

Increased domestic supply of recyclables and decreased demand from international markets has led to a decrease in the price received by MRFs and the District Government for sorted materials, resulting in increased costs to DC for recycling. MRFs have sharpened the focus on reducing contamination by retooling and slowing down processing to remove contamination onsite. They are also more carefully scrutinizing loads brought in for processing. This has resulted in decreased capacity in the region for processing recyclables as well as increased costs.

Waste Management, DPW's contractor for processing recyclables, has reported they continue to find markets for the material they process (see answer to 'Where do various types of recyclables get processed and to whom are they sold?').

Are the items I put into my recycling bin still getting recycled?

The majority of recyclables that DC residents put into their recycling bins get recycled. Almost every material collected in DC's residential recycling system has an end market where it will be purchased and recycled into a new product.

Our recycled glass is primarily used as alternative daily cover at regional landfills. This is considered beneficial reuse and a form of waste diversion. This choice for reuse of glass is due to a lack of local glass processors in the area, as well as the quality of recycled glass produced by the MRFs. The quality of DC's recycled glass is due to both the collection of glass in a single stream environment and the sorting equipment at the MRF. Initiatives are underway to improve the quality of recycled glass produced through DC's system and to find better end markets for the material.

There are three main scenarios where recyclables that are put into a curbside bin may not get recycled but end up in a landfill or a waste-to-energy facility. The first scenario is when a load of recyclables is brought to a transfer station and is found to be contaminated with too much unrecyclable material. When recyclables are very contaminated, they will not be transported to our MRF to be sorted, baled, and sold to an end market because no buyer will purchase such dirty material. Second, if there is a holdup at DPW's transfer stations due to issues with refuse disposal hauling or disposal facilities, or due to transfer station conditions or repairs, this can also result in recyclables becoming contaminated at the transfer station and therefore not being sent to the MRF for recycling processing. The third scenario where recyclables put into a recycling bin may not be recycled is during the rare occasion when both our main MRF and backup MRF are shut down for repairs.

Where do various types of recyclables get processed and to whom are they sold?

Most recyclables are transported from one of DC's two transfer stations to Waste Management's Recycle America MRF in Elkridge, MD. A portion of our recyclables is also brought to our backup facility operated by Republic Services in Manassas, VA. Below is a summary* of where each type of recyclable is sent for further processing and recycling into new products.

Cardboard boxes, paperboard, and mixed paper: Directed to paper mills domestically, as close as Virginia and West Virginia, as well as internationally, mainly to paper mills in Asia.

Steel & Aluminum: Processed in the US, primarily on the East Coast.

Rigid PET & HDPE Plastic: Processed in the Southeastern US.

Rigid LDPE, PS, and PP Plastic: Processed domestically, most frequently in the Northeastern US, where they are further sorted into specific types of plastic and then sold for reprocessing.

Glass: As mentioned above, recycled glass is primarily used as alternative daily cover for regional landfills. It is unfortunately not currently directed to a higher use such as recycled content for new glass packaging.

*Markets subject to change. Market information provided by Waste Management in April 2019.

How can residents in the District help?

Everyone in the District can help contribute to our recycling program's success by knowing what goes in their recycling bins and what doesn't. You can learn more about this with our easy-to-use [What Goes Where](#) tool on the District's Zero Waste website. The website also includes a [comprehensive list](#) of what can be recycled.

We are excited that an analysis of 2017-2018 trends in residential recycling in DC showed residents increased the amount they recycle by 9.5%. This equates to an average monthly increase of 200 tons of recyclable material. Residue, the leftover material in the recycling stream that cannot be recycled, decreased by eight percentage points from 27% in 2017 to 19% in 2018. This is important progress in the right direction, but we need to keep recycling more and better to reach our goal of 80% waste diversion by 2030. To accomplish this, DC residents should recycle only accepted materials and not put common contaminants into our recycling. Items such as plastic bags, clothing, or tangles (cables and cords), do not belong in recycling bins. Residents should always put their recyclables loose into the bin; do not bag recyclables.

Will there be changes to what can be recycled in the future?

Every two years the Department of Public Works reviews what is required to be recycled so that requirements can change with evolving recycling markets, as well as with changes in the types of materials that DC residents are using. The next update will occur on or before January 2021.