



## **Recycling: Frequently asked consumer questions**

May 1, 2018

### **Why is my garbage bill going up?**

Rates go up for many reasons. In Hillsboro we have not had to increase rates for five years. This year, increases in labor, health care, landfill and other costs are contributing. Also, major changes in recycling markets have compounded the need to increase rates. The cost of handling and processing recyclables collected from homes and businesses has steadily increased as the system has tried to adjust to market changes. A collaborative and comprehensive assessment of this change and the solutions is underway, but it will take time. The goal is to contain costs while ensuring that we continue to reduce, reuse and recycle as much of our garbage as possible.

### **I've heard that recycling is getting sent to landfills. Is this true?**

With a few small exceptions, the items that are accepted in home recycling in our region are still getting recycled. More items may have to be disposed if markets for them disappear. If recyclables do go to a landfill, it would be as a last resort, for the fewest items possible, and for the shortest amount of time possible. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality keeps a list on their website of all recyclers that have requested to dispose of materials. It can be found on the 'recycling markets' page found here: <http://www.oregon.gov/deq/mm/Pages/Oregon-Recycling-Laws.aspx>.

### **I've heard that certain items we can recycle now, like margarine tubs or milk cartons, won't be accepted in the future. Is this true?**

We don't know yet. It's possible that changes will be made to what's allowed in your recycling at home or work. That's part of what governments and the recycling industry are working to figure out: Over the long run, what are the best materials to recycle in terms of the availability of markets and the environmental benefits that come from recycling?

### **Why aren't there more options to recycle this stuff locally or at least domestically?**

There are two primary reasons for this that have developed over the past couple of decades:

- The U.S. manufactures fewer products than it used to, so there has been much lower demand domestically for the recyclables that serve as the raw materials for products and packaging.
- Many Chinese manufacturers have been willing and able to pay more for the recyclables than American companies, so the companies that get the recyclables after they are collected have sent them to China.

### **What's the long-term plan if China is no longer available as a market for recycling?**

There are already efforts underway to find other markets. So far, almost all of our recyclables have found a place to go, but that may change as all of the states and countries that have been cut off from China chase the same markets. Moving forward, we may be looking at changes in three different areas:

- What recyclables we collect and how we collect them to produce the best most saleable materials: For example, instead of creating loads of mixed plastic and loads of mixed paper, we could do more separation into the different types of plastics and paper. There are more markets in the U.S., Canada and overseas for these sorted recyclables than for the mixes. We may also have to stop recycling some materials if there are no markets.
- How we clean and sort the recyclables we collect so that more recyclables can be used by manufacturers in Oregon, the Pacific Northwest and the U.S.: Sorting technologies have changed since the first mass recycling started decades ago. Investing in updates to sorting infrastructure in our area could help us produce more marketable recyclables.
- What role manufacturers can play in the process of production and disposal: We have models out there, such as Oregon's Bottle Bill, Oregon E-Waste, and PaintCare, which all help steward the disposal of certain materials. We could look at making sure packaging has the least impact on the environment possible – not just when it's thrown away, but throughout its life, from production to disposal.

### **I've been taking the plastic clamshells and bags I can't recycle at home to my grocery store, but now they aren't taking them. Are you really telling me that these are now garbage?**

There's no place for clamshells to go, unfortunately. There remain some opportunities for bags – check your local grocery store for a collection container.

Recycling has never been the perfect solution for reducing waste. Before recycling, reduce and reuse. That can be difficult – plastic is everywhere. Try using your produce bags twice or use cloth bags instead, and look for other ways to reduce the amount of plastic you use. If you can make a better choice at the store, do it. Otherwise, the best possible thing you can do with plastic is recycle it.

### **I can't stand throwing this plastic away. Should I stockpile it until things change?**

Storing recyclables can be problematic. Food residue in containers can attract bugs and rodents and break down the material so that it isn't marketable. The best way to ensure you're recycling as much as possible is to continue to follow the list of what goes in the recycling bin at home or at work. A great resource is the regional government webpage: <https://www.oregonmetro.gov/tools-living/garbage-and-recycling-or-by-calling-503-234-3000>.

### **So which plastics can I recycle now?**

Until recently, many grocery stores and recycling facilities in our area took plastic bags and clamshells (those hinged containers a lot of to-go food comes in) for recycling, but most of those options are not currently available. And that's really frustrating for a lot of people. Here's what's important to remember about plastic:

- Sort by shape and not by number. Plastic bottles and tubs go in the recycling bin. Check the recycler database at [oregonmetro.gov](http://oregonmetro.gov) or call 503-234-3000 with any recycling questions you have.

- Absolutely do not put plastic bags of any kind in your recycling container at home. Putting them in the recycling bin causes major problems at the sorting facilities – it gets caught up in conveyors, and they have to stop and pull them out. That not only costs money, but it's also dangerous for the workers. Check your local grocery store for bag collection options.

#### **What happens to stuff in recycling bins that isn't recyclable?**

- It adds costs to the system because it has to be sorted out.
- It causes safety hazards – like when plastic bags get caught in the equipment and workers have to pull them out.
- It makes other recyclables less viable to be sold to manufacturers.
- It won't get recycled.