



Guidelines for Recycling in Your Community



pennsylvania

DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION

Bureau of Waste Management

Guidelines for Recycling in Your Community

This booklet is a simple guide to help residents and businesses understand recycling in Pennsylvania. The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is committed to supporting successful recycling programs in local communities and encourages everyone to find ways to reduce their waste streams, reuse materials, recycle what they can, and properly dispose of what they must.



DEP has overseen Pennsylvania's statewide recycling program since 1988, when the Municipal Waste Planning Recycling and Waste Reduction Act, known as Act 101, took effect. Among other measures, Act 101:

- Requires larger municipalities to offer curbside recycling programs to residents and businesses*;
- Establishes a statewide fee on waste disposal to fund local recycling programs; and
- Requires each county to develop municipal waste management plans and update them every ten years.

While DEP administers the statewide program, in Pennsylvania, **all recycling is local!** Many Pennsylvania municipalities and counties manage local recycling programs, complemented by recycling services offered by private and non-profit organizations. Local recycling programs are all unique: The collection systems, acceptable materials, and local rules are all determined by the entity that operates the program.

Factors that influence a recycling program include:

- The community's population size and density
- The mix and quality of waste materials generated
- Proximity to recycling markets (buyers for recycled materials)
- Funding and staffing levels available to operate recycling programs





While recycling programs in PA are locally controlled, they are all influenced by national and global trends. The sustainability of recycling programs in Pennsylvania requires regular adjustments to these local rules to meet the ever-changing needs of recycling markets.

This booklet will help you recycle the right way in PA by finding recycling programs in your area, learning your local rules, and following them. Read on for steps you can take to maximize the social, environmental, and economic benefits of recycling!

**Any municipality with a population greater than 10,000 residents must provide curbside recycling service. In addition, any municipality with a population between 5,000-10,000 residents and a population density of more than 300 residents per square mile must also provide curbside recycling service. These programs must collect at least three (3) materials from a list of eight (8) provided in Act 101. In addition, all mandated programs must collect leaf waste as defined under Act 101.*



Americans have been recycling since before the dawn of the modern environmental movement. During WWII, the federal government promoted recycling on the homefront as a way to help support the war effort and make good use of scarce materials.



Guide to Recyclable Materials

Learn to identify and prepare commonly recycled materials in PA to maximize your recycling and reduce costly contamination.

In Pennsylvania, under Act 101, larger municipalities must offer curbside recycling programs that accept at least three of the following eight categories of recyclable materials, along with leaf waste, as defined by Act 101.

Should you combine these materials or separate them? It varies based on the rules of your local recycling program or hauler. Whether you single-stream all materials into one bin, separate each into its own container, or some combination, remember: Learn your local rules and follow them!

Did You Know?

About 4 in 5 Pennsylvanians are served by municipal curbside recycling programs.



Recyclable	Commonly Accepted Items	Commonly Not Accepted Items
Aluminum	Aluminum cans	Scrap metal, car parts, appliances

Check if your program allows: Aluminum foil, pans, trays*

Other information: Local scrap dealers or landfill may accept more items*

Steel and Bimetallic (Tin) Cans	All cans other than aluminum	Scrap metal, car parts, appliances
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Other information: Local scrap dealers or landfill may accept more items*

Plastics	#1-#7 rigid plastic containers	Shrink-wrap packaging, unnumbered plastic, toys
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Check if your program allows: Check with your local program for what they accept*

Other information: Local retail and grocery stores may accept plastic bags*

Clear Glass	Clear glass bottles and jars	Broken glass, glassware, window panes, mirrors, light bulbs
Colored Glass	Green, brown, blue, or other color glass bottles and jars	Broken glass, glassware, window panes, mirrors, light bulbs
High-Grade Office Paper	Standard white printer/computer paper	Heavily soiled papers, or papers with bindings or clips attached

Check if your program allows: Unwanted mail, stationery, mixed papers*

Newsprint	Newspapers, including advertising inserts	Soiled newsprint
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Check if your program allows: Unwanted mail, magazines, other paper products*

Corrugated Paper (Cardboard)	Corrugated boxes (cardboard with alternating ridges/grooves)	Soiled containers, such as greasy pizza boxes
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Check if your program allows: Smooth cardboard such as cereal boxes*

*For additional information contact your County Recycling Coordinator (see page 11)

How to Identify/ Prepare	Transforms into these Recycled Products	
Aluminum items will not stick to a magnet	Bicycle frames, window frames, appliances, computer parts, new beverage cans	
Steel and bimetal items will stick to a magnet	Steel beams, rebar, car parts, appliances, new food and beverage cans	
Look for recycling triangle with plastic # on bottom of container; only include plastics accepted by your recycling program	Plastic lumber, carpet, fleece clothing, backpacks, toys, insulation, new plastic containers	
Separate clear glass from other colors if required by local program	Fiberglass, road aggregate, new bottles and jars	
Separate glass by color if required by your local program	Fiberglass, road aggregate, new bottles and jars	
Stapled papers are usually acceptable	Tissues, paper towels, toilet paper, new computer and notebook paper	
Rain-soaked newspapers can be recycled once dry	Building insulation, sheetrock, countertops, cat litter, egg cartons, newspapers, ceiling tiles	
Break down cardboard boxes flat to dimensions required by local program	Paper bags, paper towel rolls, new cardboard containers	

*Rinse clean all metal, glass and plastic containers.

Frequently Asked Questions & Common Misconceptions

Q: What harm could it do to put my single-use plastic bag in the bin that says no plastic bags, for example? Won't they have to just recycle it anyway?

A: Sending non-recyclable materials to your local recycling program contaminates the material stream. This is called “wish recycling” or “aspirational recycling.” Your single-use plastic bag, also known as “film” to the recycling industry, will NOT be recycled. Instead, a worker will likely remove your un-recyclable item at the sorting facility, slowing down the process and increasing the cost to run the recycling program. It may get caught and jam up or damage recycling equipment. Picture hair wrapped around a vacuum cleaner roller, but on machinery so big that a worker has to walk inside it to fix it.

If your plastic bag isn't caught and removed, it can result in the entire load of recyclable materials being rejected by the buyer and landfilled instead. Buyers of recycled material streams have lowered the thresholds for allowable contamination in recent years, making each consumer's actions to properly sort and clean recyclable materials even more vital to the success of a recycling program.

Also, don't put recycled materials in bags unless your municipality allows it.

Remember: **When in doubt, leave it out!** Even one bad decision can spoil everyone's recycling efforts.

Q: I've visited places where I could recycle items that I can't recycle at home. Why can't we just recycle everything, everywhere?

A: For a material to be recyclable, there must be a demand for the material and a cost-effective way to transport and transform it into a new product. Many recycling programs struggle to find markets for certain materials, so they must limit their programs to accepting what they can recycle without significant financial loss. Some communities can accept a wider array of recyclable materials because they are closer to recycling markets, have specialized sorting equipment, or have made a conscious decision to subsidize their recycling programs.

Whether traveling or at home, always pay attention to signage and follow the local recycling rules.

Q: Why do recycling programs change the rules about what can be recycled, what can be combined or separated, etc.?

A: Local rules for recycling are often changed when a modification is made to the recycling program's equipment, such as bins, trucks, or sorting machinery. Sustaining a local recycling program also requires regular adjustments to the rules to meet the ever-changing needs of recycling markets. The demand for recyclable materials continuously responds to national and global industry trends, economic fluctuations, and changing consumer preferences. Your local recycling program must periodically change its rules to adjust to these forces.

Q: What should I do with a heavily soiled but otherwise recyclable item?

A: If a recyclable item can be easily cleaned at home, rinse it and put it in the bin. But if an item is heavily soiled, trying to clean it may waste water and energy, eliminating any environmental benefit of recycling it. Some dirty items can't be cleaned at all, even in commercial recycling facilities (for example, paper and cardboard that is saturated with oil).

Heavily soiled recyclables threaten to foul the entire load, which could cause it to be rejected and sent to the landfill instead. So if your pizza box is stained with grease, you spilled coffee on the newspaper, or that peanut butter won't stop clinging to the jar, throw it away with a clear conscience.

Q: Why do recycling programs cost money? Shouldn't it be free?

A: Recycling is just another method to handle unwanted materials, and it is not free. When items can be recycled into new products, it's better for the planet and your community. However, there are many costs associated with the process of recycling, from the point of collection to the creation of a new product. These costs include maintenance of drop-off facilities and trucks; cleaning, sorting, storing, and transporting recyclable materials to markets; processing those materials into new products; and more. Some recyclable materials are in higher demand by recycling markets because they cost less to recycle than to create from new raw materials, but in other cases, the reverse is true. Local communities have a vast array of scopes and costs for their recycling programs, determined by applicable regulations and the needs of residents.

Q: How do I know what I put in the recycling bin is actually being recycled?

A: In Pennsylvania, it's illegal to dispose of source-separated recyclable materials in a landfill. If you suspect a waste hauler or anyone else is improperly disposing of recyclables, call your regional DEP office and file a complaint. All complaints are investigated and will be kept confidential.

Q: I can't recycle much or anything where I live. I want to. Is it illegal to drop off my recycling in a nearby municipality?

A: Contact the operator of the recycling program where you wish to drop off materials. They can advise you on their local rules. If recycling drop-off facilities are limited to residents of a certain county or municipality, please do not violate their rules. It could be prosecuted as illegal dumping.

Other Tips To Reduce Waste

- **Buy Recycled:** Look for products made with recycled materials when you shop, to help create a market for recyclable materials.
- **Reduce, Reuse, and then Recycle:** Reduce your waste stream by making thoughtful decisions about what you buy and reusing what materials you can, to minimize what you recycle or send to landfills.

Questions to ask yourself when making a purchase:

- Was this product made from recycled content?
- Is the packaging or container recyclable?
- Does this item contain environmentally friendly ingredients?
- Do I need to take a bag for this purchase?
- Can I buy this item in bulk?

- **Think Recycling Beyond the Kitchen:** Recyclables generated in other areas of the house, such as shampoo bottles in your bathroom or papers in your home office, are often cleaner than food containers, but these can be forgotten. To encourage a comprehensive recycling habit, keep a marked recycling bin on each floor or section of the house. It will be more convenient to carry recyclables to a central collection point in the kitchen or garage.



- **When in Doubt, Throw it Out:** If you're not sure something is recyclable, the best choice is to throw it in the trash. This eliminates potential contamination of recyclable materials, which could cause a much greater increase in unnecessary waste than just trashing your borderline item.
- **Pennsylvania Recycles!** Pennsylvania recycles approximately 7 to 8 million tons of resources each year. This cuts 10 million tons of carbon dioxide emissions from the air (equal to taking 2 million cars off the road) and saves enough electricity to power 1.5 million homes.

Did you know that about 19 out of 20 Pennsylvanians have access to some form of recycling program in their community? This includes approximately 1,050 municipal curbside pickup programs and 870 drop-off programs, which extend recycling opportunities to Pennsylvania's rural areas.

Recycle Everywhere: To recycle materials not widely accepted by local municipal recycling programs, look for other opportunities to recycle in your community. Many businesses and some non-profit organizations offer recycling programs. Try taking your:

- ♻ Single-use plastic bags to grocery and big-box stores
- ♻ Used tires to tire stores
- ♻ Used motor oil, transmission fluid and oil filters to auto parts stores and garages
- ♻ E-waste to electronics stores
- ♻ CFL bulbs to home improvement stores
- ♻ Motor vehicle and other lead acid batteries to any retailers that sell them (Act 101 requirement)
- ♻ Used clothing and household goods to charitable organizations



Other resources to help you reduce, reuse, and recycle may include:

- ♻️ Your electricity provider may offer rebates and haul-away programs to replace older appliances with more energy-efficient models.
- ♻️ Non-profit organizations take clothing and household items and distribute them to needy families or sell them, either in thrift stores or to textile recyclers, to raise funds for their charitable programs.
- ♻️ Local police stations, county sheriffs, pharmacies, and hospitals offer secure drug-drop off sites for expired, unwanted, and left-over prescription drugs; find a location at ddap.pa.gov/drugtakeback
- ♻️ Compost at home or find a farm or community garden that will accept compostable materials.
- ♻️ Local scrap businesses will accept metals, which are typically among the most valuable recyclable materials.
- ♻️ Watch out for special recycling events for hard-to-recycle materials in your area, such as electronics, appliances, and tires.
- ♻️ Try to reduce your unwanted mail by registering for "Do Not Mail" lists and converting as many bills and newsletters to electronic versions as possible.



Remember: Recycling Works in Pennsylvania!

Contact Page

To learn more about Recycling in Pennsylvania, visit:
<https://www.dep.pa.gov/recycling>

To learn more about recycling in your county and get involved,
contact your County Recycling Coordinator:
dep.pa.gov/countyrecycling, or the DEP Recycling Coordinator
in your region.

Find your DEP Regional Office here: dep.pa.gov/regions

Visit the DEP website at <http://www.dep.pa.gov>



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DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL
PROTECTION

PA Department of Environmental Protection Regional Offices

Northwest (Meadville) Regional Office

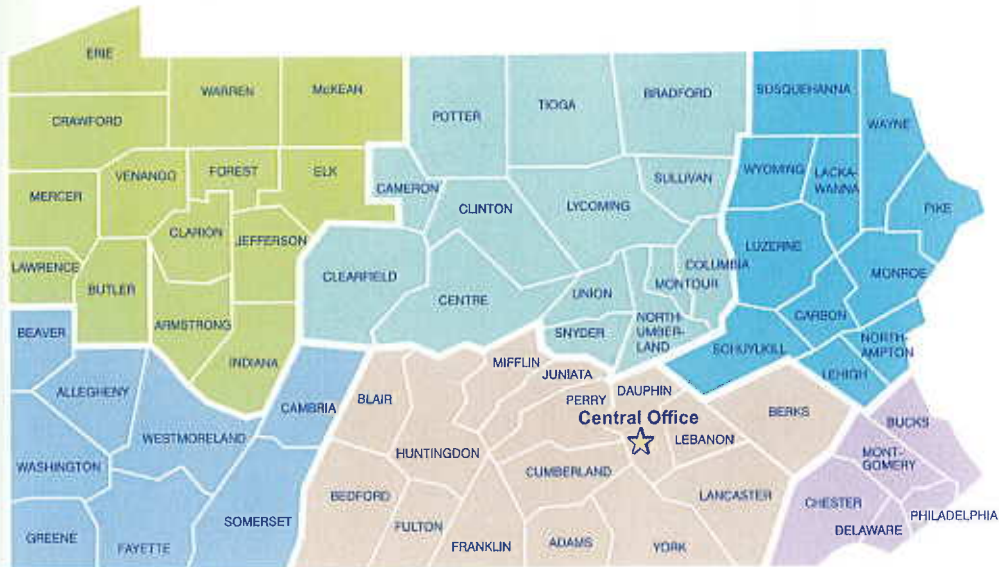
230 Chestnut St.
Meadville, PA 16335-3481
Telephone: 814.332.6945

Northcentral (Williamsport) Regional Office

208 W. 3rd St., Suite 101
Williamsport, PA 17701-6448
Telephone: 570.327.3636

Northeast (Wilkes-Barre) Regional Office

2 Public Square
Wilkes-Barre, PA 18701-1915
Telephone: 570.826.2511



Southwest (Pittsburgh) Regional Office

400 Waterfront Dr.
Pittsburgh, PA 15222-4745
Telephone: 412.442.4000

Southcentral (Harrisburg) Regional Office

909 Elmerton Ave.
Harrisburg, PA 17110-8200
Telephone: 717.705.4700

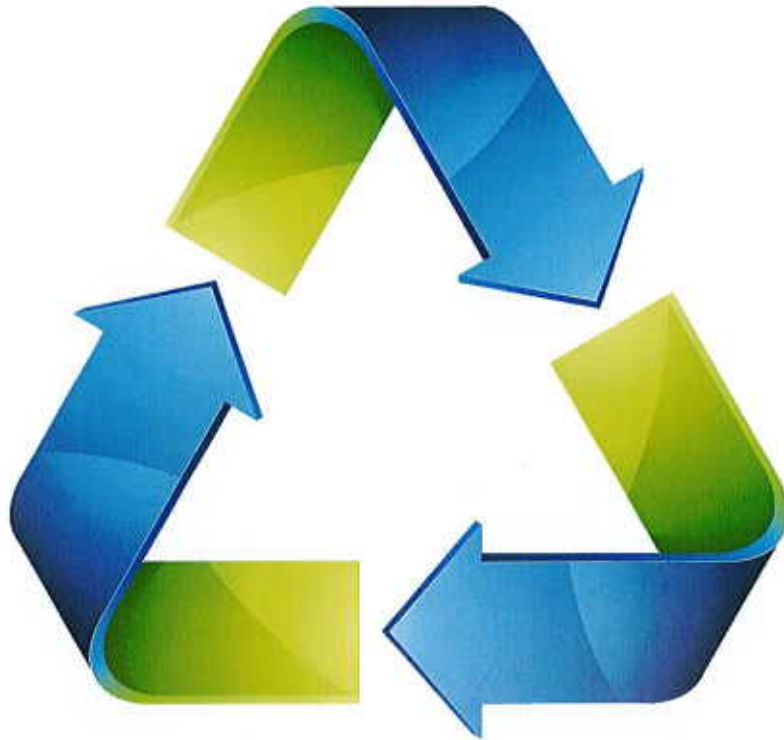
Southeast (Norristown) Regional Office

2 East Main St.
Norristown, PA 19401
Telephone: 484.250.5900

BENEFITS of RECYCLING

Environmental

(Saves energy; reduces greenhouse gas emissions and waste)



Economic

(Conserves resources;
increases jobs, wages, sales
and revenues)

Social

(Improves communities and
quality of life; builds
environmental ethic)

