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**EcoConsumer**

## **Where can we put all those plastics?**

**By Tom Watson**

*Special to The Seattle Times*

Plastics and recycling have a complicated relationship. All plastics are technically recyclable. But in the real world, plastics recycling has many limitations.



GREG WAHL-STEPHENS / AP

Plastics recycling seems to confuse and frustrate consumers more than any other type of recycling. Plastic products and packaging permeate our society, and most plastics come from fossil fuels. So plastic recycling does matter. Here's what you should know:

- **Plastics lag behind.** Nationally, less than 6 percent of all waste plastic gets recycled, compared with recycling rates of 50 percent for paper, 37 percent for metals and 22 percent for glass, says the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Plastic bottles have the highest recycling level among consumer plastics, at 24 percent, according to the American Chemistry Council. Polyvinyl chloride, a plastic under scrutiny because of health concerns, has a recycling rate below 1 percent, says Consumers Union.

Reasons for low national plastics recycling rates include the complexity of sorting and processing, unfavorable economics and consumer confusion about which plastics can be recycled.

Unlike aluminum cans or cardboard boxes, plastic containers seldom get recycled back into new containers. Instead, waste plastic must be "downcycled" into secondary recycled products such as textiles and composite lumber for decking.

- **Logos can mislead.** In 1988, the plastics industry introduced logos and numbers for plastics used in packaging (see box). The stated intent was to make it easier to identify plastics for recycling. Not surprisingly, some consumers see the familiar "chasing-arrows" recycling logo on a plastic item and assume they can recycle it. But many plastics emblazoned with the logo — such as big chunks of

polystyrene (Styrofoam) packing material or lids for plastic containers — are not accepted by residential recycling programs, due to high processing costs and lack of markets.

## Recycling resources

### In King County:

- For specifics on what you can recycle in your area, go to the county Web site and pick your city: [www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/garbage-recycling/recycling.asp](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/garbage-recycling/recycling.asp).

- For reuse options for packing peanuts and plant pots, consult King County's "What Do I Do With...?" Web site: [www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw](http://www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw), or call King County Solid Waste Division customer service at 206-296-4466.

**In Snohomish County:** See various recycling options on the county Web site: [www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/Public\\_Works/Divisions/SolidWaste/Recycling/](http://www1.co.snohomish.wa.us/Departments/Public_Works/Divisions/SolidWaste/Recycling/).

**In Pierce County:** For a recycling and disposal guide, go to the county Web site: [www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/services/home/environ/waste/recycle/recyclingdirectory/directory.htm](http://www.co.pierce.wa.us/pc/services/home/environ/waste/recycle/recyclingdirectory/directory.htm).

### Common plastics used in packaging:

- Symbol #1 PETE or PET: Polyethylene terephthalate. Main use: Beverage bottles.

To add to the confusion, certain plastics with the same number cannot be recycled together because they require a different heating and molding process.

Several Seattle-area recycling programs now tell residents to ignore the numbers. Recycling programs often keep things simple by asking for "all plastic bottles" or "plastic bottles and round dairy tubs," for example.

Always check with your program to confirm the materials it accepts.

- **Lids and caps go in the garbage.** No area recycling programs accept plastic caps or lids. Leaving the cap on a plastic bottle also makes collection and processing more difficult, because the bottle cannot easily be flattened and takes up more space. But you don't need to remove labels or the small plastic rings on the necks when you recycle plastic bottles.

- **The Others don't mix well.** Plastic containers labeled "Other," or #7, are usually polycarbonate. But an increasing number is made from new bioplastics, such as corn-based polylactic acid, or PLA. Although bioplastics will not easily degrade in a modern landfill, municipal composting programs could some day accept them. Keep all #7 containers, including PLA, out of your recycling bin.

- **Bags have a future.** A strong recycling market exists for plastic bags. Some residential recycling programs accept "bags of bags," but the recycling industry can deal with them better if you take them back to grocery-store collection bins. Never put a loose bag in your recycling bin; it can clog equipment at the sorting plant. Don't recycle plastic bags marked "biodegradable" unless specifically approved by the recycler.

- **Reducing and reusing trump recycling.** Save money and conserve resources with a reusable water bottle (metal and #2

- Symbol #2 HDPE: High-density polyethylene. Main uses: Bottles, bags.

- Symbol #3 V or PVC: Polyvinyl chloride, or vinyl. Main uses: Bags, wraps.

- Symbol #4 LDPE: Low-density polyethylene. Main use: Bags.

- Symbol #5 PP: Polypropylene. Main uses: Food tubs, caps.

- Symbol #6 PS: Polystyrene (often called Styrofoam). Main uses: Food trays, packing.

- Symbol #7 Other: Usually polycarbonate, or bio-based plastics. Main use: Bottles.

or #4 plastic are best). Single-use beverage bottles, usually #1, are not designed for long-term reuse.

Reduce the number of plastic bags you accept, and reuse them, or use durable tote bags.

Polystyrene packing peanuts cannot easily be recycled, but some shipping stores accept them for reuse.

Plastic plant pots also are not normally recycled, but a few area nurseries take them back to use again.

*The EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@metrokc.gov](mailto:tom.watson@metrokc.gov) or 206-296-4481. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com).*

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