

Columnists

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Aluminum cans: the ultimate in recycling

Nearly 60 percent of aluminum beverage cans are recycled, which is good, but we can still do better.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

When you drink a cold beverage from an aluminum can, you don't just satisfy your thirst. You also hold the potential and the challenge of recycling right there in your hand.

Nearly 60 percent of aluminum beverage cans get recycled, more than double the recycling rate for any other beverage container. Because aluminum cans are so perfectly suited for recycling, many aluminum-industry leaders and environmental advocates believe the recycling rate should be even higher.

Q: What makes aluminum cans so recyclable?

A: When many materials are recycled, they actually get "down-cycled," or turned into a product or packaging of less value than the original item. Aluminum cans, however, can be recycled an infinite number of times into new cans.

By using beverage cans and other recycled aluminum as a feedstock, the aluminum industry conserves resources, reduces greenhouse-gas emissions and saves money. When recycled aluminum isn't used, bauxite ore must be mined to make new aluminum.

Q: How important are aluminum cans in the recycling world?

A: With its long-term record of financial and environmental success, aluminum recycling sets a shiny example for other industries. Because aluminum has such a high relative value, the collection of aluminum cans often helps subsidize the recycling collection of other materials including glass, plastic and paper.

Aluminum recycling supports local jobs at recycling buyback centers and elsewhere. Many charitable organizations rely on aluminum-can collection drives for fundraising, and some low-income people depend on money they make collecting cans.

Q: So how much are aluminum cans worth these days?

A: Most Seattle-area buyback centers currently pay 40 to 48 cents per pound for aluminum cans. Prices fluctuate depending on the commodity market, and if you bring in large quantities of cans you usually get a slightly higher price. Typically about 34 used aluminum cans make up one pound.

Q: Didn't aluminum cans used to be heavier?

A: With new technology, can manufacturers have learned how to make cans using much less aluminum. In 1972, only 22 used aluminum cans equaled one pound. The light weight of aluminum has always been an environmental advantage, since less energy is required to ship aluminum cans compared with heavier glass bottles, for example.

Q: Do aluminum cans have any environmental negatives?

A: The use of the chemical BPA (bisphenol A) as a coating on the inside of most aluminum beverage cans has raised concerns. Because BPA is also used as a coating in nearly all steel food cans and in other products, this issue extends well beyond the aluminum-can industry.

Numerous studies have linked BPA to cancer and other major health risks. Companies using BPA say no firm evidence exists of negative effects from BPA, and that no viable alternatives are presently available for can coatings.

Q: I've always wondered, can I also recycle aluminum foil and trays?

A: In Seattle and most other area communities, you can put clean aluminum foil, trays used for food packaging, and pie pans in your home-recycling cart. Leave the foil mostly flat, not wadded up. Check with your recycling-collection program if you're not sure they accept these items. Reuse them first if you can, and if they are dirty, put them in the garbage.

Some local recycling buyback centers also accept clean aluminum foil and trays, but might not pay for them. Foil uses a different aluminum alloy than cans, so it is recycled separately.

The first aluminum cans appeared 50 years ago, and since then the aluminum beverage can has become an American icon and a proud symbol of recycling.

The aluminum industry wants more recycled aluminum, with some industry officials calling for a 20 percent increase in the recycling rate for aluminum cans, which would raise it to a stellar 80 percent. As consumers, we should respond by saying, "Yes, we can."

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