



Recyclability: “Why Can’t I Recycle This?”

TWO TYPES OF RECYCLING

Before we can unpack the concept of recyclability, we must acknowledge that **there are two types of recycling:**

1. **Bin/cart recycling:** This is what most people think of when they think of recycling--the mix of acceptable items that you can put in your recycling bin/cart at home, school, work, etc.
2. **Special program recycling:** This refers to items that have recycling potential, but never belong in your recycling bin/cart. They can only be recycled through a special pick-up, drop-off, or mail-in program.

THE “CHASING ARROWS” SYMBOL

Federal regulations regarding recyclability claims are rarely enforced. Some manufacturers use this symbol to indicate that their product is made *from* recycled materials. Others may use it to indicate that their product is one of the few items accepted in most programs. Unfortunately, many use it misleadingly or incorrectly. The only way to know what is recyclable is to find out what is recyclable *where you live*. **Ignore the symbol.**

A LOCAL DETERMINATION

While a few items—paper, cardboard, metal cans, plastic bottles, and plastic jugs—are accepted in most bin/cart recycling programs, **there are no national recycling guidelines**. Again, the only way to know what is recyclable is to find out what is recyclable where you live. In RI, that means checking with Resource Recovery.

A MANUFACTURING PROCESS

No matter what motivates you to recycle—be it saving natural resources, setting a good example for your kids, or simply abiding by the law—we should never forget that **recycling, at its core, is the provision of raw materials to a manufacturer**. In order for a material to be recycled in RI, all of the following must be met:

1. A market must exist, i.e. companies must be willing to buy the recycled items for use in manufacturing. Keep in mind that just because a market exists now, doesn’t mean it always will. Likewise, just because there isn’t a market now, doesn’t mean there never will be! **Markets change over time.**
2. We must be able to store that material, and specifically in the case of the mixed recycling program, we must be able to process it *within a larger mix* and sort it out from that mix using available technologies.
3. We must also be able to supply a company with the volume they need, in the condition they desire, on the schedule they require. **We compete with other recycling facilities.**
4. When all is said and done—after separation, collection, processing, storage, and shipping—we need to be able to pay for it. **Although environmental stewardship is a priority, recycling is not free.**

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CLOSING THE LOOP

One way to help create market demand for recyclables is to buy products made *from* recycled materials. If manufacturers see demand from their customers, they may respond by seeking out more recycled materials.

CHANGES TO RECYCLING PROGRAMS

While markets can change quickly, it is not practical to change our recycling guidelines every month or year. Think about it: **Can you imagine having to re-learn what’s accepted in our program that frequently?!** Market changes may require that we store, reuse/repurpose, or even temporarily landfill a material that we cannot move to a recycler. This is an occasional but expected part of the recycling process. The best example of changing markets and recycling in RI is glass. You’ll find a timeline below. **Please continue to recycle your glass bottles and jars.** If/when it ever became necessary to remove glass bottles and jars from RI’s mixed recycling program, rest assured that we would inform the public.

TIMELINE: GLASS RECYCLING IN RI

1988-2006	Recycled; strong market; many items still being made and sold in glass bottles and jars
2006-2013	Reused; market dwindles in Northeast as companies switch from glass to plastic; RI DEM approves beneficial reuse of glass as landfill cover material, displacing virgin materials
Oct-Apr 2013	Landfilled; RI law passed to prohibit beneficial reuse of glass as alternate landfill cover
Apr-Jun 2013	Recycled; small local market develops, relying heavily on one glass bottle manufacturer
Jun 2013-Jan 2014	Landfilled; RI’s 3-color glass mix not adequate for recycler due to contamination
Jan 2014-Jan 2018	80% recycled; recycler invests in glass cleanup operation; 20% reused to cover loads awaiting landfilling (to prevent windblown litter)
Jan-Jun 2018	Local bottling plant closes; Recycler no longer has adequate outlets for all glass; Resource Recovery stockpiles glass and works to identify new options for reuse
Jun 2018-Present	Reused; RI law passed to allow beneficial reuse of glass as alternate landfill cover

“WISHCYCLING”

When it comes to recycling, we know people mean well! Oftentimes, they may want something to be recycled so badly that, regardless of our recycling guidelines, they “wishcycle” and toss it in their recycling bin/cart, in the hopes that we’ll “figure it out.” Not only are we unable to recycle items we don’t accept, but their presence can reduce efficiency, damage our equipment, cause injury to workers, and reduce the quality of other materials. In RI, these are **the only four things that are accepted** in your mixed recycling bin/cart at home, school, or work:



1. Paper, cardboard, and cartons
2. Metal cans, lids, and foil
3. Glass bottles and jars
4. Plastic containers

Remember:

- Empty at a minimum, rinsed whenever possible
- No plastic bags!

Follow these guidelines and you’ll be a good recycler. If you want to take your recycling from good to great, download our detailed mixed recycling guidelines at www.rirrc.org/mixed-recycling.

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