Glossary

Don’t know single stream from source separated? We can help you sort through all of the recycling terminology.

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

A

ABATEMENT
The reduction in landfill waste caused by source reduction and recycling.

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY
Energy derived from nontraditional sources (e.g., compressed natural gas, solar, hydroelectric, wind).

ALUMINUM
Aluminum is a lightweight, silver-white, metallic element that makes up approximately 7 percent of the Earth's crust. Aluminum is mined in the form of bauxite ore where it exists primarily in combination with oxygen as alumina. Aluminum is used in a variety of ways, but perhaps most familiarly in the manufacture of soft drink cans.

B

BALE
A large block of compacted and bound recyclables.

BALER
Special equipment that compacts and binds recyclables to help reduce volume and transportation costs.

BIODEGRADABLE
The ability of some materials to break down or decompose rapidly under natural conditions and processes.

C

CAPTURE RATE
The percentage of generated post-consumer materials recovered from a business.

CARBON DIOXIDE
A heavy colorless gas (CO_2) that does not support combustion, dissolves in water to form carbonic acid, is formed especially in animal respiration and in the decay or combustion of animal and vegetable matter, is absorbed from the air by plants in photosynthesis, and is used in the carbonation of beverages. CO_2 is one of the greenhouse gas chemical compounds.

CARBON FOOTPRINT
A carbon footprint is the measure of your impact on the environment in terms of the amount of greenhouse gases produced, measured in units of carbon dioxide.

CARDBOARD
Also known as old corrugated cardboard (OCC). Unbleached, unwaxed paper with a fluted inner liner made up of a series of parallel ridges and furrows.

CHIPBOARD
A sturdy, often 100% recycled, Kraft-colored (brown) packaging material comprised of pressed fiber thick paper.

CHLOROFLUOROCARBONS
CFCs are man-made chemical compounds containing carbon, chlorine, fluorine and sometimes hydrogen. CFCs drift into the upper atmosphere where, given suitable conditions, they break down ozone. CFCs are often used in older refrigerators and air conditioners, the chlorine in CFCs damage the ozone layer.

CLIMATE FEEDBACK
An interaction mechanism between processes in the climate system is called a climate feedback, when the result of an initial process triggers changes in a second process that in turn influences the initial one. A positive feedback intensifies the original process, and a negative feedback reduces it.

CLOSE THE LOOP
A term used to describe the last, and most important, step in the recycling process. It refers to the point when a consumer buys a recycled product after it has been put into a recycling program and reprocessed into a new item. (See: Recycle Symbol)

COLLECTOR
A company that picks up materials that have been set aside for recycling.

CO-MINGLED MATERIALS
Different types of recyclables mixed in one container – e.g., plastics, papers, metals – that are collected and processed together. Require sorting after collection. See: Single Stream Recycling.

COMPACTOR
Special equipment that compresses recyclable materials and contains them under pressure, not allowing them to expand until they are unloaded.

COMPOST
Composting is Nature's way of recycling. Compost is a mixture that consists largely of decayed organic matter and is used for fertilizing and conditioning land.

CONSERVATION
Conservation is the wise use of natural resources (nutrients, minerals, water, plants, animals, etc.). Planned action or non-action to preserve or protect living and non-living resources.

D

DIVERSION RATE
The amount of waste being diverted from landfills due to recycling.

DRY WASTE

Non-putrescible (unlikely to decompose), non-hazardous waste material, comprised of at least 50% of recyclable material by weight.

E

END USERS
Businesses and manufacturers that buy recyclable materials and convert them into new products.

F

FERROUS METALS
Magnetic metals which are predominantly composed of iron. Includes steel.

FOSSIL FUEL
Fossil fuels are the remains of plant and animal life that are used to provide energy by combustion; e.g. coal, oil, and natural gas.

FRONT END LOADER
A solid waste collection truck equipped with two hydraulic forks used to pick up and empty waste containers from the front.

G

GAYLORD CONTAINER
The trade name for a large, reusable container used for shipping recyclable materials.

GENERATOR
A group or industry that produces waste or recyclables.

GLASS
Glass is a hard, brittle, generally transparent or translucent material typically formed from the rapid cooling of liquefied minerals. Most commercial glass is made from a molten mixture of soda ash, sand, and lime.

GLOBAL WARMING
Global warming is an increase in the near surface temperature of the Earth. Global warming has occurred in the distant past as the result of natural influences, but the term is most often used to refer to the warming predicted to occur as a result of increased emissions of greenhouse gases. Scientists generally agree that the Earth's surface has warmed by about 1 degree Fahrenheit in the past 140 years.

GRADING
A system of sorting and rating waste or recyclable materials into categories by type and quality.

GREENHOUSE EFFECT
The effect produced as greenhouse gases allow incoming solar radiation to pass through the Earth's atmosphere, but prevent most of the outgoing infrared radiation from the surface and lower atmosphere from escaping into outer space.

GREENHOUSE GAS (GHG)
Any gas that absorbs infrared radiation in the atmosphere. Greenhouse gases include, but are not limited to, water vapor, carbon dioxide (CO_2), methane (CH_4), nitrous oxide (N_2O), chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs), and ozone (O_3).

H

HAULER
An individual or company that collects and hauls waste or recyclable materials from one place to another.

HDPE
High density polyethylene. A type of plastic that is commonly used in milk and water jugs.

HIGH-DENSITY POLYETHYLENE (HDPE)
Often referred to as #2 Plastic. Recyclable plastic used to make plastic bottles, milk cartons, and other similar products.

HIGH-GRADE PAPER
Relatively valuable types of paper, such as computer printouts.

HOUSEHOLD HAZARDOUS WASTE (HHW)
A product that is discarded from a home or a similar source that is either ignitable, corrosive, reactive, or toxic (e.g. used motor oil, oil-based paint, auto batteries, gasoline, pesticides, etc.).

K

KILOWATT-HOURS
Kilowatt-hours are used to measure electricity and natural gas usage.

L

LANDFILL
A private or municipal site where non-hazardous waste is buried.

LIFE CYCLE ASSESSMENT
Life cycle assessment is a methodology developed to assess a product's full environmental costs, from raw material to final disposal.

LEAD
Lead is a substance that is harmful to the environment, which is used in a lot of paints. It's also toxic to humans.

LIGHT POLLUTION
Environmental pollution consisting of the excess of harmful or annoying light.

LOW-DENSITY POLYETHYLENE (LDPE)

Often referred as #4 Plastic. Recyclable plastic used to make many types of bottles and containers.

LOW-EMISSION VEHICLES
Low-emission vehicles are cars, and other forms of transportation, which emit little pollution compared to conventional engines.

LOW-GRADE PAPER
Less valuable types of paper, including mixed paper, corrugated cardboard, and newsprint.

M

MANDATE RECYCLING
Programs that require certain recycling practices or results by law.

MIXED PAPER
Waste paper of various kinds and levels of quality, including stationery, notepads, manila folders, and envelopes.

MIXED WASTE
Unsorted waste from businesses.

MUNICIPAL SOLID WASTE
Garbage or refuse that is generated by households, commercial establishments, industrial offices or lunchrooms and sludges not regulated as a residual or hazardous waste. This does not include source-separated recyclables.

N

NEWSPRINT
The low-grade paper used to make newspaper.

NITROGEN OXIDES (NOX)
Gases consisting of one molecule of nitrogen and varying numbers of oxygen molecules. Nitrogen oxides are produced in the emissions of vehicle exhausts and from power stations. In the atmosphere, nitrogen oxides can contribute to formation of photochemical ozone (smog), can impair visibility, and have health consequences and are considered pollutants.

NON-FERROUS METALS
Metals which contain no iron, such as aluminum, copper, brass, and bronze.

NON-RENEWABLE RESOURCE
A resource that is NOT capable of being naturally restored or replenished; a resource that is exhausted because it has not been replaced (e.g. copper) or because it is used faster than it can be replaced (e.g. oil, coal [what we call fossil fuels]). Their use as material and energy sources leads to depletion of the Earth's reserves and are characterized as such as they do not renew in human relevant periods (They are not being replenished or formed at any significant rate on a human time scale).

O

ORGANIC
A term that refers to molecules made up of two or more atoms of carbon, generally pertains to compounds formed by living organisms.

P

PACKAGING
The wrapping material around a consumer item that serves to contain, identify, describe, protect, display, promote, and otherwise make the product marketable and keep it clean.

PAPER
A thin material made of pulp from wood, rags, or other fibrous materials and used for writing, printing, or wrapping.

PAPERBOARD
Heavyweight grades of paper that are used to make containers, boxes, cartons, and packaging materials.

PAPER STOCK
Scrap or waste paper that has been sorted and baled into specific grades.

PET
Polyethylene terepthalate. A type of plastic used to make soft drink bottles and other kinds of food containers. PET is also used to make fabric.

PLASTIC
A material made from petroleum capable of being molded, extruded, or cast into various shapes. There are many different kinds of plastic made from different combinations of compounds. To learn more about the plastic resin codes #1-#7 and what these plastics are recycled into, check here.

POLLUTION
Contamination of air, soil, or water with harmful substances.

POLYETHYLENE TERAPHTHALATE (PETE)
Often referred to as #1 Plastic. Clear or colored, high-gloss recyclable plastic used for beverage bottles and household cleanser containers.

POLYPROPILENE (PP)
Often referred to as #5 Plastic. Plastic with a smooth surface; difficult to scratch but cracks easily when bent. Often used for battery cases, dairy tubs, jar lids, straws, and syrup bottles. Difficult to collect in substantial quantities for recycling. Limited uses in its recycled form.

POLYSTYRENE
Often referred to as #6 Plastic, or Styrofoam. Plastic with a smooth surface that cracks easily when bent. Used for fast food packaging, cups, and packing peanuts. Takes up a large part of landfill space because of its bulk. Difficult to transport (and therefore recycle).

POLYVINYL CHLORIDE (PVC)
Often referred to as V-3 or #3 Plastic. Environmentally indestructible plastic that releases toxic hydrocloric acid when burned. Used for food wraps and personal care product containers.

POST-CONSUMER MATERIAL
Any commercial product which has served its original, intended use and is then discarded by the consumer. Often has the potential to be recycled.

PRE-CONSUMER WASTE
Waste material generated during the manufacturing process, prior to reaching consumers. Often applies to printing. Includes scraps, trimmings, overruns, etc.

PRECYCLE
Source reduction option in which goods are selected based upon the potential recyclability of the product after use.

PUTRESCIBLE
Waste likely to rot or decompose, such as food waste.

R

REAR END LOADER
A traditional solid waste collection truck loaded manually from the rear.

RECYCLABLE
Products or materials that can be collected, separated, and processed to be used as raw materials in the manufacture of new products.

RECYCLE SYMBOL
The chasing arrow symbol used to show that a product or package may be recycled if there is a program available. On plastics, it is used along with a numbering system (1-7) to help designate plastic resins used in the product. The three arrows on the symbol represent different components of the recycling process. The top arrow represents the collection of recyclable materials (e.g. an aluminum can, a piece of white office paper, a plastic #2 milk jug) for processing. The collection can be from a curbside collection or a drop-off site. The second arrow (bottom right) represents the recyclables being processed into recycled products (e.g. a new aluminum can from an old aluminum can, notebook paper from white office paper, a park bench from recycled plastic milk jugs). The third arrow on the bottom left is the most important arrow. This one represents when the consumer actually buys a product with recycled content. This is the most important step as it closes the recycling loop. Without this last step, we are pretty much just sorting our garbage.

RECYCLED
A term used to describe material that has been separated from the waste stream, reprocessed into a new product (often taking the place of virgin material), and then bought back by the consumer as new item.

RECYCLED CONTENT
The amount of pre- and post-consumer recovered material introduced as a feed stock in a

material production process, usually expressed as a percentage (e.g., 30% post-consumer content).

RECYCLING
Process by which materials that would otherwise become solid waste are collected, separated, and processed, allowing them to be reused in the form of raw materials or finished goods.

RECYCLING CENTER
A location where recyclables are collected and processed so they can be returned to the market in the form of raw materials or finished goods.

REFORESTATION
Planting of forests on lands that have previously contained forest but that have been converted to some other use.

RENEWABLE RESOURCE
A resource that is capable of being naturally restored or replenished (e.g. trees).

REUSE
To find a new function for an item that has outgrown its original use; use again (e.g. peanut butter jar for a collection; wash and reuse dishes).

ROLL-OFF
An open-top container used to collect bulk waste. Transported by a special trailer which uses hydraulics to roll the container on and off the truck.

S

SALVAGE
The act of obtaining post-consumer material through collection, sorting, etc.

SANITARY LANDFILL
A landfill that has been designed and engineered to accept municipal waste while ensuring minimal negative impact upon the environment.

SCRAP
The portion of solid waste which can be economically recycled. Waste with value.

SECONDARY MATERIAL
See: Post-Consumer Material.

SHREDDER
Special equipment that reduces the size of recyclable materials through shearing action.

SINGLE STREAM RECYCLING
A type of recycling in which all recyclables are combined in the same container and sorted by the recycling center after collection. See: Co-Mingled Recycling.

SOLID WASTE
Refuse. Trash. Garbage. Does not include hazardous materials or liquid waste.

SOURCE REDUCTION
An action undertaken to reduce waste at the point of generation, thereby decreasing the amount of material that enters the waste stream. Source reduction strategies include reuse, recycling, and precycling.

SOURCE SEPARATED RECYCLING
A type of recycling in which recyclables are sorted by type at the source of generation, prior to collection.

STEEL
A strong, durable material made of iron and carbon, and often other metals, to achieve different properties. Steel is often used as a component in cans and as a structural material in construction.

SUSTAINABILITY
The practice of not taking from the earth those things that cannot be reused or replaced.

T

TRACE GAS
A trace gas is any one of the less common gases found in the Earth's atmosphere. Gases such as carbon dioxide, water vapor, methane, oxides of nitrogen, ozone, and ammonia, are considered trace gases. Although relatively unimportant in terms of their absolute volume, they have significant effects on the Earth's weather and climate.

TOTAL WASTE MANAGEMENT
The total management of a site or company’s waste, including both waste disposal and recycling.

V

VERMICOMPOSTING
The process whereby worms feed on slowly decomposing materials (e.g., vegetable scraps) in a controlled environment to produce a nutrient-rich soil amendment.

VIRGIN PRODUCT
Term that refers to products that are made with 100 percent new raw materials and contain no recycled materials.

W

WASTE
Unwanted materials remaining from manufacturing processes, or refuse from humans and animals.

WASTE AUDIT

The process of identifying the types and quantities of materials in the waste stream to help establish waste management recommendations. Common recommendations include purchasing changes (precycling), source reduction, and recycling programs.

WASTE STREAM
The flow of waste material from generation to disposal. Includes materials that may be reused, recycled, composted, buried in landfills, or burned.

WEEE
Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment are broken or unwanted electronic gadgets like mobile phones or computers.

WINDPOWER
Energy derived from the wind.