

The Truth About Plastics Recycling

We need to talk.

We know you've seen the headlines that plastic recycling is a "dead end" or, even worse, "a dumpster fire," and we know you've got questions. This month, we are setting the record straight. **Plastics recycling is real and is happening in Massachusetts.** News stories that say otherwise aren't telling the whole story and don't reflect the reality of recycling in our state.

Recycling in Massachusetts

Massachusetts is home to nine Materials Recovery Facilities (MRFs) where more than **638,000 tons** of plastic containers, paper, bottles, and cans go for sorting every year. (See [map](#) below for locations, or check out our [Where Does It Go page](#) to see where your municipality's recyclables go.)

At a MRF (pronounced "murph"), mixed recyclables travel through a sophisticated maze of manual and mechanical sorting processes. Once the paper, cardboard, metals, and plastic are separated, they're compressed into 1,000-pound bales and sold to recycling companies to be made into new products and packaging. [Watch this Instagram story for a tour of the process.](#)

Massachusetts' first MRF was built in Springfield in 1991 by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Recently retrofitted to improve its sorting efficiency, the Springfield MRF (SMRF) uses near-infrared (NIR) technology to identify different plastic resin types and then sorts those resin types into distinct bales. In fiscal year 2022, the SMRF sent 1,752 tons of plastic bottles, jars, jugs and tubs to plastics recyclers, including [Unifi](#) and [KW Plastics](#). Plastics recyclers wash, grind and pelletize the plastic into post-consumer resin (PCR) Tipping floor and examples of plastic bales at the Springfield MRF.

How Do We Know the MRFs Are Really Recycling?

The Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) regulates the activities of MRFs and our enforcement staff conduct regular inspections. MRFs are obligated to report annually to MassDEP (under penalty of perjury) the tons of material they recycled, and, upon request, where the material was sent for recycling. When our inspectors visit, they look at the outbound commodities (paper, plastic, metal, glass) and inspect the "residue" to ensure that it consists of things that are not recyclable.

What's residue?

The residue pile is what is sorted out of the recycling because it doesn't belong there in the first place. In the residue pile, you'll find things like plastic bags, garden hoses, small appliances, t-shirts, shoes, diapers, and small (or large) plastic materials that people chuck in the bin "just in case." A small portion of recyclable material does end up in the residue. It's usually the result of mis-sorting or due to contamination, but the MRFs must comply with Massachusetts waste bans which prohibit the disposal of recyclables. Not only is dumping waste ban items against the law, it also costs an average \$100 per ton to send it to landfill or to incinerate it. Learn more about the waste bans here.

Don't Believe the Naysayers

Here's where "only 5% of plastics are being recycled" comes from: If all the plastic products produced in the world – from car bumpers and medical devices to appliances and polyester clothing (see image below) – are lumped together and compared to the plastic that is recycled from residential and commercial recycling programs, you get a recycling rate of 5% or 9% depending on the data source.

We argue this number is misleading, because it gives the impression that all of that stuff is designed to be recycled and is meant to be recycled – it isn't. The only plastics that are recyclable in our residential and commercial recycling programs are rigid plastic containers and packaging.

Source: The Recycling Partnership – *By The Numbers Webinar: Unpacking the Data Behind Plastics Recycling*

Where We Agree

We agree that our world is full of plastic and that there's way too much of it. We need to produce and use less, especially the kind we can't recycle and for which there are better alternatives (like Styrofoam). We agree that a lot of perfectly good plastic bottles, jars, jugs, and tubs are not recycled. We also agree that recycling rates need to improve (and we truly hope that these reports don't result in even less recycling)! There are too many areas across the country that do not have equitable access to recycling (40 million U.S. households don't have a recycling option). We agree that recycling is not a panacea for our waste problem, but it IS a valuable tool in the toolkit and should not be dismissed or disparaged. We agree that everything that CAN be recycled, SHOULD be recycled.

So What's Next?

We need to do better at recycling ALL of the rigid plastic food, beverage and household products containers we can. The plastics recycling industry not only wants these containers and has the capacity to recycle them, but experts say a shortage of recycled plastics will prevent major consumer brands from meeting their sustainable packaging goals and complying with new laws.

At the same time, we need to support efforts to design packaging for recycling. Because there's still lots of plastic packages on our grocery store shelves that aren't recyclable. And that's got to change. The most powerful thing you can do is speak out. Email the company whose product you love, but whose package you can't recycle and ask them to change it. Now more than ever, consumer brands are listening to their customers' demands for sustainable products and packaging.

Recycle Smart

Use Recycle Smart's [Smart Recycling Guide](#) and the Recyclopedia to make sure you're putting the right stuff in your recycling bin. These tools were created by MassDEP and MRF operators to help reduce confusion and "wish-cycling," and to ensure our efforts to separate trash from recycling aren't made in vain.

Please don't let the headlines fool you. Recycling is happening in MA!

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What We're Reading

- [Statement in Response to Greenpeace '22 Plastics Recycling Report](#) – The Recycling Partnership
- [MassRecycle Rebuttal to NPR Article](#) – MassRecycle
- [Recycling Industry Responds to Greenpeace Report Alleging Most Plastics Are Not Recyclable](#) – Recycling Today
- [How Gen Z is Turning into the Zero Waste Generation](#) – GBH
- [MassRecycle Podcast: Textile Recycling \(Interview\)](#) – MassRecycle

Wishing you a great Thanksgiving,

The Recycle Smart Team at MassDEP

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