

Frequently Asked Questions

Why did the guidelines change for curbside recycling?

Curbside recycling is facing a contamination crisis. Contamination is caused when people place materials in the recycling bin that do not belong. Recycling processors have a difficult time sorting out the trash, which makes its way into the sorted/baled material that is sold to market. For a long time, China was the largest buyer of this material from the U.S. And because of increasing contamination levels, China made the decision to stop importing this material. This left the U.S. with an overabundance of recyclable commodities (re: baled material) with a lot of trash mixed in.

To address the contamination issue in Lancaster County, and ensure curbside recycling is sustainable, we went “back to the basics” with four material types that have a strong domestic market—meaning, there is a demand for this material by manufacturers in the U.S. We call these materials the “Big 4” and include: 1) corrugated cardboard (like shipping and packing boxes), 2) metal food and beverage cans, 3) plastic bottles and jugs with a neck, and 4) glass bottles and jars.

Why are some materials allowed in the recycling bin, while others go to a drop-off location?

In Lancaster County, we use a process called “single-stream” recycling, where residents can put all their approved recyclables into one bin. These materials are collected and taken to a materials recovery facility (MRF) where they are sorted, baled, and sold to manufacturers, who turn them into new products. The sorting process is mostly automated, using various screens, magnets, and optical sorters to identify materials. MRFs are built to only sort certain items, so any additional materials are contaminants.

For some materials, like newsprint, plastics bags and Styrofoam, these materials can be recycled, but must be separated and taken to an approved drop-off location. Do not place these materials in your recycling bin, as the MRF cannot separate them and they may be contaminants, which are discarded as trash.

If something has the recycling symbol on it, does that mean it can go in my bin?

No. The “chasing arrows” symbol is simply a communication tool used by manufacturers. Sometimes it means a manufacturer used recycled material in the product. Other times it shares information about how the product is made. For instance, the chasing arrows symbol with a number indicates the plastic resin code—meaning the base type of plastic being used. But plastics are made in different ways, and use various additives, which give them their shape, flexibility,

strength, etc. So, not all plastics with a particular number (ex: #1 PET) are the same.

Follow the Big 4 guidelines only when deciding whether something should be placed in your curbside bin. You can use the chasing arrows symbol as a guide when buying materials, as you look for items that include recycled content in the product.

Where can I take items that are recyclable but shouldn't go in my curbside bin?

Some items, like newspaper, cereal boxes, and plastic bags, can be recycled but should not go in your curbside recycling bin. If you think something could be recycled, please visit earth911.com to verify if there is a drop-off location near you. If you aren't sure, please discard the item in your trash. Placing material in the recycling bin in hopes it will be recycled is "wishful recycling" and adds to the contamination crisis.

What happens to the items I put in the trash? Do they go to the landfill?

Fortunately, in Lancaster County, material placed in the trash does not go to a landfill. LCSWMA owns two waste-to-energy (WTE) facilities where trash is

combusted and turned into renewable energy. In fact, 1 in 5 Lancaster County homes are powered by trash!

Why can't I put newspapers in my curbside bin?

In Lancaster County, we use a process called “single-stream” recycling, where residents can put all their approved recyclables into one bin. These materials are collected and taken to a materials recovery facility (MRF) where they are sorted, baled, and sold to market. Unfortunately, when newspapers are mixed with other products, they often become wet or contaminated with food residue, which makes them no longer valuable.

China bought contaminated mixed paper for a long time, but due to the contamination crisis, recently banned this material. So, we need to clean up our recycling bins in the U.S., and this means keeping newsprint separate so it stays clean and dry. You can take this material to an approved drop-off location. Search earth911.com for a location near you.

My municipality or trash hauler has different information than LCSWMA. Who do I listen to?

If you live in Lancaster County, please follow these guidelines. We are working to align all municipalities and trash haulers, including the information available to

the public. This was a big change in our community and it will take time for all of the information to be updated.

Why aren't other communities making these changes?

The contamination crisis is a nation-wide crisis that is still unfolding. Many communities are working to understand the issue and develop a plan on how to address it in their area. In Lancaster County, we took a bold step to overhaul our program to ensure curbside recycling is sustainable for the future. Communities across the nation will be making changes as the months unfold.

Are the recent changes all about money?

Curbside recycling has always had a cost; but for a long time that cost was offset by the revenue from selling recycled materials to manufacturers—mostly located in China. Now, with the major upset in the industry, the price for recycled commodities has dropped significantly. Materials recovery facilities (MRFs) must adjust their rates to keep their operations financially viable. But most importantly, we need to clean-up what goes in the recycling bin. Reducing contamination, by putting only the Big 4 in the bin, will provide a cleaner product to the MRF, which will help lower the cost for recycling processing.

For LCSWMA, helping our community recycle right is a philosophic issue that we are passionate about. Lancaster County recycles about 35,000 tons of single-stream material each year, of which 20-40% is contaminated material. If we could lower that rate by 10%, that's only 3,500 additional tons in the waste stream (LCSWMA manages about 1 million tons of waste annually). So, it's not a significant amount, but an important step in helping our community recycle right. Lancaster County is a leader in many areas, and we want our community to also be a model for proper, sustainable curbside recycling.