

UPDATE and HIGHLIGHTS!

The Truth about Plastics Recycling

What You Need to Know and Do in the City of Palm Springs

*A joint message from
the City of Palm Springs Sustainability Commission
and
Palm Springs Disposal Services*

The world is struggling with a plastics problem.

While plastic products play a vital role in our world, they can often end up in fields, rivers, and oceans causing harm to people, animals, and the planet.

Although recycling can help address this problem, the only markets for many types of plastics have traditionally been in Asia, meaning that these materials have to be shipped thousands of miles away. Unfortunately, beginning around 2015, the Asian markets began to decline dramatically. Today, materials processors are having a difficult time finding other outlets, which has led to considerable confusion about where plastics products are actually going and what residents should do with them.

In this article, we will talk about some of the different types of plastics, what you should do with them now, and what to keep out of your recycling bins to help ensure that materials that are sent for recycling actually get recycled.

What Happens After the Cart?

You put paper, glass, metal and plastic materials into your recycle cart, but then what happens? The route truck collects the contents from your cart and delivers the load to a local transfer station, where it is consolidated into larger capacity trailers and transported to a material recovery facility (“MRF”) in the Inland Empire.

At the MRF, the material is loaded onto conveyor belts and undergoes a variety of manual and mechanical sorting processes using air, optics and magnets. First, the system separates the various materials by type. Next, the sorted material is consolidated into bales or containers for transport to various processors or manufacturers that ideally convert the material into a feedstock and ultimately new products.

Types of Plastics

The first step in recycling begins with what the consumer purchases. You can:

- Buy products made from recycled materials to help ensure there is a demand for the materials you recycle.
- Determine if a product and/or its packaging is recyclable by looking for recycling symbols and labels from the manufacturer.

When examining plastic products and plastic packaging, look for the plastic arrows, typically on the bottom of the container, surrounding a number – usually #1 - #7. Some manufacturers are also adopting new “How2Recycle” labels that can provide additional information.

#1 Polyethylene or PET & #2 High Density Polyethylene or HDPE

These are familiar as

- PET (#1) Plastic Water bottles, soft drink bottles, juice containers, etc.
- HDPE (#2) Plastic Milk jugs, detergent containers, shampoo bottles, etc.

These two categories of plastic containers continue to have positive market value, and they are being recycled by U.S. manufacturers. They will not end up in landfill as they make their way from recycling product to manufacturing, and therefore should be the preferred plastic when you do purchase a plastic product or product in plastic packaging.

Other Numbered Plastics (#3 - #7)

Plastics #3 thru #7 are still being collected and sorted by our MRF. Currently, these materials have very limited markets and little or no market value. They are either being sent overseas or stockpiled when market demand is low.

At this time, we are hesitant to eliminate these plastics from the recycling stream because we are cautiously optimistic that these plastics may have a market in the future. The California legislature is actively working on domestic market development as well as producer/manufacturer responsibility (SB 54 & AB 1080). Also, these plastics may be a potential product or energy resource in the future.

So, for now, continue to recycle Plastics #3 thru #7.

Bioplastics

Bioplastics are materials produced from renewable biomass resources and are marketed as compostable. Good examples are foodware produced from starches like corn, potato, tapioca, cellulose, and bamboo.

These products do eventually decompose so technically they are compostable. However, local compost facilities do not accept compostable bags or foodware because their decomposition takes much longer (about 180-days) than the decomposition cycle for food waste and landscape waste. And, bioplastic products actually degrade the nutritional value of compost because they themselves have zero nutritional value. Bioplastic products should be placed in the trash, not your recycling cart.

Bioplastics do have a place in your environmental decision-making as an option to plastics as they will decompose in the landfill. But, reusable foodware should be the first choice.

Unmarked Plastics

Unmarked plastics are usually a bonded blend of recyclable materials that are NOT recyclable because they are blended or bonded. They do not belong in your recycling cart.

For Further Information

Plastics By The Numbers, <https://learn.eartheasy.com/articles/plastics-by-the-numbers/>

Plastics Recycling, National Public Radio, <http://apps.npr.org/plastics-recycling/>

###