

ZERO-SORT HAS A DIRTY SECRET: 50% OF YOUR RECYCLING GOES TO LANDFILLS

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Casella Waste Systems' zero-sort recycling program is marketed as a simple, effective solution that allows customers to dispose of all recyclables in a single bin, eliminating the need to separate materials at the source. While this approach promises to make recycling more accessible and environmentally friendly, the reality behind zero-sort paints a much different picture. A large portion of the materials collected through this system never reach recycling facilities and instead end up in landfills, raising concerns about the program's true impact on the environment and whether its marketed claims are misleading.

THE ILLUSION OF ZERO-SORT: CONTAMINATION & LANDFILLING

The cornerstone of zero-sort recycling is convenience. By allowing consumers to throw all recyclable materials—glass, plastic, paper, and metals—into one bin, Casella promotes an easy solution to a complex problem. However, this convenience comes with significant downsides, chief among them being contamination. When different materials are mixed together, even a small amount of food residue, liquids, or grease can render entire batches of recyclables unusable. Contaminated materials are often too costly or difficult to clean, forcing waste management companies to send them to landfills instead of recycling centers.

Data from municipalities using zero-sort systems show that contamination rates can range from 15% to 27%, depending on the type of materials and local recycling practices. In some areas, contamination rates are even higher. When materials like food-soiled cardboard, broken glass, or greasy plastics are collected in a zero-sort bin, they spoil not only themselves but also other clean materials they come into contact with. As a result, a significant portion of what consumers believe is being recycled ends up being landfilled instead.

THE REAL NUMBERS: WHAT ENDS UP IN LANDFILLS?

While zero-sort programs are promoted as an environmentally responsible service, the numbers tell a different story. Research indicates that 40-50% of the materials collected through zero-sort recycling end up in landfills due to contamination or inefficiencies in sorting. This figure is much higher than the typical 30% contamination rate that is often cited. In some regions, the percentage of material being landfilled is even higher, depending on local recycling infrastructure and market conditions.

HOW MUCH ENDS UP IN LANDFILLS?

Glass: As much as 40-60% of glass in zero-sort systems ends up in landfills due to contamination from breakage and mixing with other materials.

Plastics: Plastics are notoriously difficult to recycle, and the contamination rates in zero-sort programs push the already low plastic recycling rate even lower. Globally, 91% of plastics end up in landfills, and zero-sort programs contribute significantly to this problem.

Paper and Cardboard: While paper and cardboard have a relatively high recycling rate when separated properly, contamination in zero-sort systems causes 20-30% of the material to be discarded in landfills.

Metal: Metals, such as aluminum and steel, are some of the most successfully recycled materials, but even in zero-sort systems, 10-15% of metal can be contaminated and sent to landfills.

These statistics reveal that Casella's zero-sort system is not as effective as advertised. Instead of reducing waste, it often increases the amount of recyclable material that is ultimately sent to landfills, negating much of the environmental benefit that consumers expect from participating in the program.

PROFITING FROM RECYCLING & LANDFILLING

One of the most concerning aspects of Casella's zero-sort system is the economic structure behind it. Customers pay a premium for the convenience of not having to sort their recyclables. However, when contaminated materials are discarded as waste, Casella often profits again through landfill tipping fees. In other words, Casella collects payment for recycling services while simultaneously benefiting from the disposal of materials that should have been recycled. This raises ethical concerns about the motivations behind the zero-sort system.

Casella's ongoing efforts to expand its landfill operations only heighten these concerns. With more materials from the zero-sort program being funneled into landfills due to contamination, there is growing demand for landfill space. Rather than improving recycling systems or investing in contamination reduction strategies, the company's business model appears to prioritize landfill expansion—a path that undermines the very principles of sustainable waste management.

CASELLA'S MARKETING: EMPTY PROMISES OF ZERO-SORT

While Casella advertises zero-sort recycling as a solution that reduces waste and makes recycling easier, the evidence suggests otherwise. The company's marketing focuses on the convenience of a single-bin system, but it glosses over the significant contamination issues that come with it. Consumers are led to believe that the materials they place in their recycling bins will be responsibly processed, but in reality, a large portion is landfilled due to contamination.

This discrepancy between what is promised and what is delivered can be viewed as misleading. It creates a false sense of environmental responsibility among consumers, who believe they are doing their part to reduce waste, only to find that much of their effort is wasted when their recyclables end up in landfills. Casella's failure to address this problem more transparently undermines consumer trust and calls into question the true efficacy of zero-sort recycling.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT: MORE LANDFILLS, MORE PROBLEMS

The environmental cost of zero-sort recycling goes beyond the waste itself. When recyclables are contaminated and landfilled, the environmental benefits of recycling—such as conserving resources and reducing greenhouse gas emissions—are lost. Instead, the waste contributes to methane emissions, soil and water contamination, and the loss of valuable resources that could have been reused.

As more waste is funneled into landfills, the need for expanded landfill capacity grows. Casella's push for new and expanded landfills in New England reflects this increasing demand. This trend is not only environmentally damaging but also places a burden on local communities, which must contend with the negative effects of nearby landfills, including air and water pollution, reduced property values, and public health risks.

A PATH FORWARD: REDEFINING RECYCLING

Casella's zero-sort system represents a flawed approach to recycling. While the concept of convenience is appealing, the reality is that it sacrifices environmental outcomes for ease of use. To address these issues, more transparent communication about what can and cannot be recycled is essential. Educating the public on proper recycling practices and reducing contamination should be a priority for any waste management company claiming to promote sustainability.

Municipalities and businesses must reconsider the value of zero-sort systems. Returning to source-separated recycling, where materials are sorted at the source by the consumer, may involve more effort, but it significantly reduces contamination and increases recycling rates. Investments in better sorting

technology and infrastructure can further enhance recycling efficiency and prevent the need for expanded landfills.

THE NEED FOR ACCOUNTABILITY

Casella's zero-sort system, while marketed as an environmentally responsible solution, falls short of its promises. With a significant percentage of collected recyclables ending up in landfills, consumers are left paying for a service that does not deliver the benefits it advertises. The company's marketing paints an image of convenience, but the reality is that zero-sort often leads to more waste, not less. As more information comes to light, it is clear that greater transparency and accountability are needed in the recycling industry.

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Sources:

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Container Recycling Institute

The Guardian

Resource Recycling Systems (RRS)

Municipal Solid Waste (MSW)