

Opinion | You're probably recycling plastic wrong. And it's not your fault.



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(Bill O'Leary/The Washington Post)

Picture this: You finish a drink from a red Solo cup, and before throwing it out, you check the bottom of the cup to see the iconic recycling symbol. That means it can be tossed in the recycling bin, right?

Wrong. Solo cups are made of polystyrene, a plastic that is very difficult to recycle. No one can fault consumers for not knowing that. The real blame lies with the government, which has failed to properly regulate claims that plastics manufacturers put on their products.

The core of the problem is that there is no recycling system in the United States; there are upward of 20,000 of them. As a result, it's nearly impossible to say which items are actually recyclable. Without stricter standards, consumers will continue to be confused, seriously hampering the effort to divert waste from landfills.

Just because something can be recycled *in theory* doesn't make it recyclable *in practice*. Solo cups are a case in point: Only a small portion of curbside waste

services collect them. (While the packaging notes this, the cups themselves do not.) For the cups to be turned into new products, most consumers would need to collect them separately and deliver them to specialty services.

Unsurprisingly, the Environmental Protection Agency reports that a “negligible” number make it through this cumbersome process.

Mostly, people see the recycling symbol and assume or hope the item will be recycled somehow. This “wishcycling” contaminates the waste stream, making the system more costly and less effective. In fact, the Recycling Partnership estimates that more than 15 percent of the plastic bottles that are most readily recyclable end up in landfills because plants struggle to sort them from other plastic waste.

Samples of plastic items that are inconsistently or rarely accepted by recycling plants

Portion of facilities that accept these plastic items for recycling.



Plastic cups
9%



Plastic bags
1%



Plastic cutlery,
straws and stirrers
0%



Plastic tubs
labeled number 5
52%



Coffee
pods
0%



Plastic lids
and plates
2%



Plastic food
wrappers
0%

Source: Greenpeace's survey of 375 American recycling facilities in 2022.

Some people find the labels so confusing that they simply don't recycle anything. In one 2019 poll, almost a quarter of Americans said recycling is more complicated than filling out their taxes.

And who could blame them? Unlike in countries such as Germany, which has standardized what can be collected for recycling and enforced presorting of waste, U.S. policymakers never sat down to figure out how to make this easy on consumers. In fact, it was the plastics industry that created the system of resin codes that include the "chasing arrows" and a number between 1 and 7 to denote the primary material included.

Nowadays, the only plastic items that are consistently recycled are bottles and jugs made out of polyethylene terephthalate (which is labeled with a "1") and high-density polyethylene (labeled with a "2"), as a survey of recycling facilities by Greenpeace shows. Recycling plants typically reject almost everything else, meaning it ends up in landfills.

This wasn't always the case. For years, the United States was able to send its plastic waste to China for recycling. But that changed in 2018, when China stopped accepting the material from the United States. No alternative destination has since emerged, yet plastics still regularly feature those codes with the recycling symbol.

There has been an effort in recent years to clamp down on these misleading labels. In 2021, California passed a law to ban the use of the recycling symbol on products unless they are collected for recycling in at least 60 percent of the state's communities. Since companies tend to market their products nationally, most will have to change their labeling to note when recycling might not be available for their products. The Federal Trade Commission is also currently updating its guidelines.

But these efforts are unlikely to change consumer behaviors on their own. Many people simply won't read the fine print on labels, and most will not "check locally" to see if their area collects products.

One rule should govern waste management: Keep it simple. Determining whether a majority of local waste systems collect certain items for recycling is difficult, not just for consumers but for businesses and policymakers, too. More important is determining whether there's a substantial market to turn

items into something new. That should play a key role in labeling something as recyclable, as the EPA has advocated.

Doing so would likely disqualify all but a few plastic products from bearing the recycling symbol, which would likely anger many businesses. But the government should stand firm. Forcing companies to be honest about whether their products are recyclable could spur innovation to make that the case. Beyond labeling, the government needs to do more to prevent plastics that cannot be recycled from reaching the market in the first place. There are many ways to do this, from forcing companies to pay for their plastic pollution to banning single-use items, as Canada and many other countries have already done.

Overall, the government's goal should be to move the onus of figuring out recycling away from consumers and onto industries. Americans consistently say they want to do their part to build a sustainable economy. That needs to be a whole lot easier.

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