

Recycling Update: Paper and Plastic Cups Are Now Welcome!

Big news for businesses committed to sustainability: You and your customers can now recycle paper and certain plastic cups with WM nationwide! This milestone is part of a national collaboration with major brands and sustainability stakeholders to make to-go cups widely recyclable across the U.S.



What is Accepted in Recycling

WM accepts:

- Hot and cold beverage paper cups, such as coffee cups (with sleeves) and soda cups
- Plastic cups made from polypropylene (PP or #5), such as cold drink cups for soda and iced coffee

Not accepted:

- Foam cups (expanded polystyrene)
- Rigid polystyrene (i.e., colorful party cups with #6 on the bottom)
- Lids, straws, and stoppers

How to prepare cups for recycling:

- Empty all liquids
- Remove straws, stoppers, and food

Why This Matters to Your Business

In our view, presenting products in recyclable packaging enhances your brand image and demonstrates environmental responsibility. The 2025 WM Recycling Report found that 48% of survey respondents say the impact of a company's sustainability goals is a strong factor when making purchasing decisions, and 77% say they notice recycling availability in stores.

WM is working to make recycling easier and clearer for cups.

- For plastic cups to be called “widely recyclable,” at least 60% of U.S. residents need curbside or drop-off recycling access.
- For paper cups, we're aiming for a “check locally” label, which means at least 20% of residents can recycle them.

These designations follow FTC guidelines to ensure claims are accurate and avoid greenwashing. Our goal is to give you clear recycling guidance, so you and your customers know how to recycle cups and make everyday choices more sustainable.

¹ Recyclability designations and industry best practices are set by GreenBlue to help brands align with FTC guidance and avoid greenwashing.

If your business uses plastic cups, consider selecting options that are recyclable—such as paper cups or plastic cups marked with a #5 on the bottom. Updating the type of cup used in your business enables recycling at your workplace by employees and, in many cases, by your customers as well.

Why Are Paper and Plastic Cups Accepted Now?

WM is expanding what we accept to better serve our customers. Here's why paper and plastic cups are now part of the recycling stream:

- **Brands are switching materials:** Many companies are moving away from foam and adopting recyclable paper or plastic cups.
- **WM upgraded its facilities:** We're executing plans to invest over \$1.4 billion from 2022-2026 in new and upgraded recycling facilities with advanced sorting technology that is expected to process material, including cups, more effectively and increase the capacity available to serve our customers.
- **Growing end market demand:** U.S. manufacturers want recycled paper and polypropylene (PP) materials to make new products.

How do recycling centers know paper cups belong with paper—not bottles and cans? Do machines really sort that out?

Many modern recycling facilities use advanced optical sorting technology to improve how materials are identified and directed. Most WM facilities use a strategically placed optical sorter just before the container line to detect fiber-based items, including paper cups, and redirect them into the paper stream.

While paper cups are technically 3D objects, their behavior during sorting depends on their physical condition:

- Crushed or flattened cups mimic 2D items and are sorted with other fiber materials.
- Uncrushed cups may initially follow the container line path, but optical sorters can still identify and recover them as fiber.

Ultimately, the system is designed to recover paper cups regardless of whether they follow a 2D or 3D sorting path. This ensures that cups are correctly sorted into paper bales and sent to mills for recycling.

What Can Recycled Cups Turn Into?

Paper Cups

Recycled paper cups can be turned into:

- Cereal boxes
- Facial tissues



- Corrugated boxes
- New paper cups

Plastic Cups (PP)

Recycled plastic cups can be used to make:

- Paint cans
- Plastic lumber
- Pallets
- Crates
- Garden products

Tools developed by the Foodservice Packaging Institute (FPI), like the [Paper Mill Statement](#), the [Recycling End Markets Interactive Map](#), and others provide transparency and insight into the growing network of recovery options across North America. Visit recyclefsp.org/end-markets to explore the data and see how recycling access continues to expand.

Are cups listed as contaminants in industry specifications?

No. Paper cups are now included as allowable in ReMA's ISRI Inbound Residential Single Stream Specifications and Dual Stream Specifications. Click to learn more here: <https://www.isrispecs.org/single-stream/>.

Polypropylene cups are included in the ReMA's ISRI PP Small Rigid Plastic bale specifications. For more, visit: https://www.isrispecs.org/orpheus_resource/pp-small-rigid-plastic/.

These changes in specifications mean that the industry standard has now been updated to include these materials.

I need to update my signage around my store. Where can I find up-to-date lists of what can go into my single stream recycling container?

We've updated our Recycle Right® website and educational materials to reflect this exciting change, including:

- Easy-to-understand posters and flyers
- Step-by-step guides on how to recycle cups properly

Visit <https://wm.com/recycleright> to explore and download the latest resources.

Together, we can make recycling simpler, clearer, and more impactful. Let's give paper and plastic cups a second life—and give your business the tools it needs to help do it right.

