

Community Recycling Update: Paper and Plastic Cups Are Now Welcome!

Good news for your community: WM now accepts paper and plastic cups in your recycling program! This exciting update is part of a national initiative with major brands and sustainability stakeholders to make to-go cups widely recyclable across the country.

Why Does This Announcement Matter to My Community?

Your community plays a vital role in making this initiative successful. That means your community's recycling information on your website directly impacts whether cups can be recycled nationwide.

By updating your community's website to reflect this change, you're helping:

- Ensure consistent messaging across platforms
- Reduce confusion for residents
- Empower your community to recycle more effectively
- Support a national sustainability effort that can benefit everyone

Why Are Paper and Plastic Cups Accepted Now?

WM is expanding what we accept to better serve our communities. 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 on 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.

To comply with Federal Trade Commission (FTC) guidelines and avoid greenwashing, all sustainability claims must be backed by data. For plastic cups to be labeled "widely recyclable," at least 60% of U.S. residents must have access to curbside or drop-off recycling programs. This access is currently verified through local municipal websites.¹

We're also working toward a "check locally" designation for paper cups, which requires that at least 20% of U.S. residents can recycle them.¹

Our goal is to make recycling guidance more transparent, helping customers understand where and how to recycle their cups—and ultimately supporting more sustainable everyday choices.

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



- End markets demand for these materials are growing: U.S. manufacturers want recycled paper and polypropylene (PP) materials to make new products.

What is Accepted in Recycling

WM accepts:

- Hot and cold beverage paper cups (e.g., coffee cups with sleeves and soda cups)
- Plastic cups made from polypropylene (PP) (e.g. cold drink cups for soda and iced coffee)



Not accepted:

- Foam cups (Styrofoam™)
- Rigid polystyrene (#6)
- Lids, straws, and stoppers

How to prepare cups for recycling:

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

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.

Where Do Recycled Cups Go? What are the End Markets?

Paper Cups

Accepted by mills like Pratt, Smurfit WestRock, and Sonoco, 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 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.

How Can We Work Together to Make Cup Recycling a Success in Your Community?

Great news! WM has already taken big steps to make recycling paper and plastic cups easier for your residents. 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
- Updates to local WM.com sites so residents get accurate, localized information

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

Here's how your city can help: Your municipal recycling website is one of the most important tools for educating residents. It's also used by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) to determine whether items like plastic cups meet the national "widely recyclable" threshold and paper cups meet the "check locally" threshold.

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

