



Does Plastic Recycling Work in Minnesota?

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When businesses consider sustainability initiatives, one question consistently comes up: How effective is our recycling system really? While many business owners and residents feel comfortable recycling items like paper, metal, and glass, plastic recycling often raises more questions and concerns. One commonly cited statistic is that “only 9% of plastic is recycled,” which leads to hesitation in committing to plastic recycling. Understandably, businesses implementing a recycling program want assurance that their efforts are contributing to a system that processes their recycled items into new materials. Questions surrounding the effectiveness of plastic recycling are widespread and fuel skepticism about recycling as a whole. Waste Wise is dedicated to setting the record straight and advocating for business sustainability.

Unpack(ing) the Data

Greenpeace’s report, [Circular Claims Fall Flat Again](#), and others like it, state that “only 9% of plastic was recycled globally in 2019, and only 5-6% of plastic waste was recycled in the U.S. in 2021.” These statistics are often misinterpreted. A U.S. reader might assume that if they place 100 recyclable plastic bottles into a recycling bin, only 5-6 bottles will be recycled. Greenpeace derived this figure using the recovery percentage, by weight, of *all plastic produced in the United States*, not just bottles and containers that are typically accepted in curbside recycling programs.

The 5-6% statistic was calculated including items like vinyl siding, health care equipment, lawn furniture and many other plastic items that are rarely recyclable. As a result, the statistic does not accurately reflect the recycling rates of products that are actually recyclable. For example, more than [29%](#) of #1 and #2 plastics (such as water bottles and milk jugs) produced in the U.S. are recycled by consumers.

Lumping all plastics, including non-recyclable items, into a single data point is misleading and drives the misconception that plastic placed in recycling bins are discarded as trash. The 9% metric simply means that, of all the plastics produced in one year globally (recyclable or not), 9% were processed at recycling facilities.

Although the 29% recycling rate for #1 and 2 plastics is higher than the 5-6% figure, it is still a lower recycling rate compared to other categories, like paper and cardboard which have a [68.2%](#) recycling rate. This is due to many factors nationwide, including:

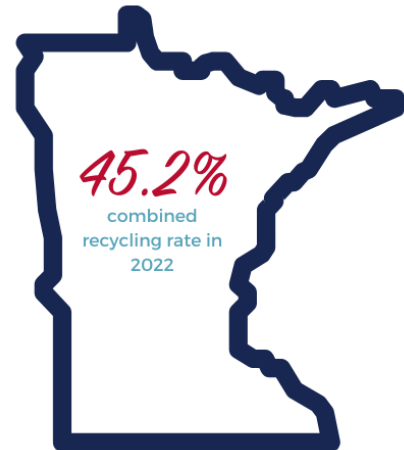
- Low consumer participation
- Limited or no access to recycling services for households or businesses
- Limited resources and education on plastic recycling

- Plastic being a newer recyclable item compared to other categories
- Confusion surrounding resin identification codes
- Improper sorting due to mislabeled recycling bins

Despite these challenges, in the Twin Cities metro area one can be confident that if they are placing 100 recyclable plastic bottles into a recycling bin, 100 bottles will be recycled. The key is to get the correct plastic types into the recycling bin to begin with.

What About Minnesota?

It's important to understand that access to recycling facilities varies significantly across the United States. Most Minnesotans have access to recycling programs that accept #1, #2 and #5 plastics.¹ In 2022, the [state's overall recycling rate was 45.2%](#), ranking 11 in the nation. For comparison, recycling rates range from as low as 2% in West Virginia to 65% in Maine. The differences highlight the importance of regionally specific education, media coverage and transparency about recycling programs.



While Greenpeace claims sorting various plastic types (#1, #2, #5, etc.) is impossible for effective recycling, Minnesota's Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) show otherwise. MRFs rely on sophisticated mechanical and manual methods of sorting to separate plastic types with high accuracy. The Dem-Con MRF in Shakopee is the sorting destination for many recyclables collected in the Twin Cities. They offer in-person tours of their facility, as well as a [library of educational videos](#) that demonstrate how their facility operates.

According to Dem-Con's president, Bill Keegan, *"If you put the right plastics, #1, #2, and #5 in the bin, they will get recycled. In Minnesota and across the country, there are strong end markets for #1, #2 and #5 plastics."*

Of the [24%](#) of #1, #2 and #5 plastics² that are placed into recycling bins in the metro area, more than 99% of them are recycled into new materials, according to Keegan. Minnesota [laws](#) hold MRFs accountable to high standards, including Law 115A.95, which requires that materials in recycling bins are delivered to recycling facilities, not to landfills.

¹ Plastics with the Resin Identification Code 1, 2, or 5 are recyclable in all seven metro counties. In some non-metro counties, only plastics 1 and 2 are recyclable. Check your county or city's recyclable materials list for more information.

² Data derived from averaging Minnesota's PET (27%), HDPE (39%) and PP (7%) recycling rates.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) also sets limits on the “residual” of MRFs, or the amount of material that is not recycled. MRFs are legally required to recycle at least 85% of what they accept, and many Minnesota MRFs have residual rates as low as 5%.

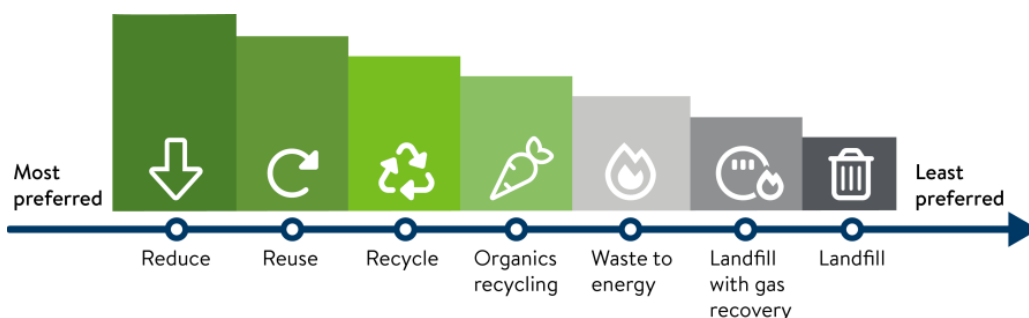
Another frequent concern is where recycled materials ultimately end up. In Minnesota, your recycling is [staying local](#): 74% of recycling becomes new items within the state, 94% remains in the Midwest and 98% stays in North America.

Minnesota’s recycling position is significantly different than many other states due to its well-developed end markets. [78,000 Minnesotans](#) are employed by the recycling industry, amounting to \$7.96 billion in annual wages. The recycling infrastructure in our state is something we can take pride in and is a system that’s worth supporting.

Room for Growth

While Minnesota is positioned as a growing leader in national recycling, there is always room for improvement. Although 45.2% is the highest recycling rate recorded in Minnesota’s reporting history, more work needs to be done to meet the state’s goal of a [75% recycling rate by 2030](#) for all metro counties. While Waste Wise strongly advocates recycling as a solution, we acknowledge that recycling isn’t the only, or best solution available to Minnesotans.

According to the [MPCA’s waste hierarchy](#), reduction and reuse are environmentally preferable to recycling, but recycling is still preferable to landfilling or incineration.



Minnesota Pollution Control Agency waste hierarchy

Reduction and reuse remain high priorities within the waste industry, but recycling fills a niche for items that must continue to be produced. Most recycling professionals would agree that our country’s recycling system is imperfect. There are collection, contamination, and market issues, and lots of work is necessary to optimize these systems. Recycling professionals such as haulers, MRF operators, nonprofits and local government organizations should continue working to

communicate openly about industry issues and share improvements. Transparency is key in an ever-changing landscape like recycling.

While misleading claims such as “only 9% of plastic is recycled” undermine the credibility of a functioning system, they also encourage transparency and accountability. Although recycling is an imperfect system, participating in it is still very worthwhile.

How Can I Help?

Waste Wise supports reuse and reduction in the business community through grants and technical assistance to swap wasteful items for zero or lower waste systems. We also support projects that add or expand recycling and organics recycling. Waste Wise is eager to help businesses become part of the solution to waste less in Minnesota and work towards the 75% recycling goal. If your business or nonprofit is interested in participating, reach out to us at wastewise@mnchamber.com.

Education is another important tool in increasing recycling rates—for plastic and other materials in single-stream recycling. When people confidently know which items belong in the recycling bin, everyone wins! Waste Wise offers free staff training in most metro counties to spread recycling knowledge. If you are curious about recycling in your neighborhood, touring your local MRF either virtually or in-person is an amazing opportunity to see recycling in action. Many communities also offer free Recycling Ambassador programs.

There is power in your dollar, as well. As consumers, we can help by recycling (providing a supply) and buying items made from recycled materials (creating demand). Recycling cannot exist without participation; set up recycling at your home and business, educate yourself on what belongs in the blue bin and tell your friends to recycle too!

A Path Forward

Despite being an already successful system, we can always improve at recycling. Having spoken with hundreds of business owners, we know that given the necessary support, resources, and information, people genuinely care about reducing our state’s waste. Initial skeptics we’ve met with have gone on to implement incredibly successful and innovative waste reduction projects. The only obstacles were misinformation and a sense of powerlessness to make change within a system that “doesn’t work.” That’s why Waste Wise is invested in combating misinformation and empowering people to positively impact their communities, one bottle at a time.