

Frequently Asked Plastics Questions

Responses from N.C. DPPEA and the Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers

1. **What is a plastic bottle?** A plastic bottle is defined by N.C. G.S. 130A-309.10(f) as “a recyclable rigid plastic container that has a neck smaller than the body of the container, and that accepts a screw top, snap cap or other closure.” It does not pertain to motor oil bottles or pesticide containers.

It is safe to assume practically all plastic bottles that hold a beverage, like soda or water, are banned from the landfill. Other plastic bottles can include:

- Sports drink bottles
- Juice bottles
- Milk jugs
- Salad dressing bottles
- Condiment bottles
- Laundry detergent bottles
- Dishwashing detergent bottles
- Cough syrup bottles
- Mouthwash bottles
- Shampoo/conditioner bottles
- Liquid soap bottles

2. **Are any plastic bottles excluded from the ban?** Yes, plastic bottles that contain motor oil or pesticides are specifically excluded from the disposal ban.
3. **Are plastic tubs (e.g. yogurt containers, margarine tubs) included in the ban?** No, although plastic tubs may be labeled as #1 or #2, like soda bottles and milk jugs, plastic tubs are made using a different formula and often are considered a contaminant. Only a couple communities in North Carolina accept plastic tubs so it is best to check your program’s guidelines before you place any non-bottle plastic container in your recycling bin.
4. **How should I handle plastic bottles that contain chemicals or automotive fluids such as brake fluid or transmission fluid?** Although these bottles are not explicitly exempt from the disposal ban, there is a chance that these bottles will act as a contaminant during the recycling process. The best bet is to contact your recycling collector or processor to determine if they can accept them. If they cannot accept them they can be considered “non-recyclable” and may be disposed.

5. **Should I rinse my plastic bottle before I put it in the bin?** Yes, but it isn't required. Residue left in the bottles can contaminate other plastic and can prevent your bottle and others from being fully recycled into a new product. Often sugary drink bottles can attract bees and vermin if not recycled in a timely manner. A quick rinse helps the whole recycling process.
6. **Can I keep the lid or cap on?** If possible, place lids in the trash before recycling your plastic bottle. Lids are often made out of a different plastic than the bottles, so the lid plastic can contaminate the bottle plastic which reduces the value of material and requires additional resources to separate them before processing. Plastic lids can also jam recycling equipment at your local materials recovery facility. What's more, since most plastic bottles are baled (squished into large cubes), the ones with tightly fastened lids can explode when the temperature increases, posing a significant risk to recycling workers.
7. **What do the numbers on the bottom of a plastic container mean?** Plastics have different densities and the numbers differentiate the different types of plastic resins. A list of the different resin types can be found here - <http://www.p2pays.org/BannedMaterials/PlasticBottles/docs/Plastic%20Guide8.5x11.pdf>.
8. **Why would a plastic container (i.e., Styrofoam cup) have the recycling arrows on it even though it can't be recycled in my community?** The three chasing arrows symbol means that product is recyclable somewhere, but maybe not in your N.C. community. This is why it is important to learn what is acceptable or not in your local program. Contacts for your local recycling office can be found here - <http://p2pays.org/localgov/ncwaste.html>.
9. **Why isn't Styrofoam recyclable?** Styrofoam doesn't weigh much but takes up a lot of volume, so it is not very economical to haul Styrofoam long distances to recycling facilities.
10. **Where will my plastic bottle go?** If you recycle a bottle in North Carolina, there's a good chance your bottle will stay within the Carolinas, where it's recycled, processed and turned into new material. To see an example of this plastic bottle recycle cycle loop, click here http://www.p2pays.org/BannedMaterials/PlasticBottles/docs/plastic_bottle_cycle_8x11.pdf
11. **Why can't I put everything plastic in my recycling bin?** While all plastic is recyclable, not all can be collected or recycled in your local or municipal recycling program. A solid market exists for plastics #1 (PET) and #2 (HDPE), and your local materials recovery facility is equipped to sort these plastics. More than 96 percent of plastic bottles are #1 (PET) or #2 (HDPE) plastic, so make sure you put all your plastic bottles in a bin!
12. **How many times can a plastic bottle be recycled?** A plastic bottle's reuse, also called remelting, depends on how much contamination has been carried through the material. A plastic bottle can be recycled eight times into a new bottle, but it's more sustainable for your plastic bottle to be turned into other items, like carpet, with a longer single use.

13. **I have a bottle made of corn-based plastics. Can I recycle that?** Plastic made of corn, referred to as PLA and has a #7 recycling number, is currently not recyclable in North Carolina communities. If you are certain you have a PLA bottle, it's best to put it in the trash.

14. **What's the difference between a plastic tub and a plastic bottle?** The RE3.org blog took this issue head on in a recent blog entry. Read about it here: <http://re3org.blogspot.com/2009/02/why-cant-i-recycle-all-2-plastics.html>. Essentially a bottle is made from blown plastic and a tub is made from molded plastic. Due to this difference they have to be recycled separately from each other and not all towns accept molded plastic.

15. **What else can my plastic bottle be recycled into?** Just some of the items made from recycled plastic bottles include: new bottles, rulers, fleece jackets, handbags, cell phones, hats, patio furniture, toothbrushes, lanyards, carpets, tote-bags, construction timber, dog beds and even a boat!