



News Release

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Why Are Materials that Don't Belong in Recycling Bins Called "Contamination"?

TORONTO, ON – Municipalities and other organizations involved in recycling typically describe the materials that don't belong in recycling bins as "contamination". But that word frequently confuses people who, day in and day out, do their best to recycle what they should.

Used in the broadest sense of the word, "contamination" is correct. Any material that is not accepted in a recycling program, whether its food packaging such as plastic stretch wrap or objects like metal engine parts, when put into recycling bins, "contaminates" the load of correct materials that are to be recycled. This can result in the collection truck operator rejecting the entire bin and leaving the contents at the curb or, if collected, those materials can cause problems at the recycling facility.

According to recycling communication strategist, Barbara McConnell, a better phrase to use is "unaccepted materials".

"Generally speaking, we all understand it when someone tells us that a material is not accepted in our recycling programs," McConnell said.

"Many packaging materials that are described as contaminants in recycling programs are not toxic in any way. It's just that they are not accepted in the recycling program at this time, usually because no end-markets have been developed for the material yet. This is particularly true of the new types of packaging that are appearing on our grocery shelves, such as pouches." McConnell said.

In the case of unacceptable material like engine parts, it's "just plain wrong" to put those things in recycling bins, she adds.

Why It's Really Important to Be Better Recyclers

The recycling materials we all put into our recycling bins are commodities, just like any other natural resource. For community recycling programs to make sense economically, they need to produce high quality products in the way of bales of materials – aluminum cans, plastic bottles, plastic jugs, newspapers and flyers, fine paper such as printer paper, and more – that can be sold to end-markets. Those materials are then processed into new products, closing the recycling loop.

While recycling technology has made leaps and bounds in improving the recycling process, the fact of the matter is good quality recycling material starts at the curb.

"What it comes down to is that all of us who are recycling at home are the most important cogs in the wheel of effective recycling programs," McConnell said. "What we put into our recycling bins at the very beginning of the process sets the standard. It's really important that we be better recyclers by getting it right at home and at work," McConnell said.

Barbara McConnell is a communication consultant working in the recycling field. She is a communication coach for Recycle Coach. People can sign up for Recycle Coach at RecycleCoach.com or through [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#). Take the [Recycle Coach Recycling Quiz](#).

About RecycleCoach.com

Recycle Coach comprises a small group of committed individuals who have been working for 15 years to improve communications between municipalities and residents about recycling. Our goal is to help people be better recyclers. We've launched RecycleCoach.com to help bridge the gap between what local governments are able to do, and what residents need in order to be better recyclers. RecycleCoach.com provides information about recycling in individual municipalities and free online reminders that residents set themselves.

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