Reducing Contamination

in the Recycling and Food and Yard Waste

A Priority of Seattle Public Utilities (SPU)

Why is Reducing Contamination Important?

Recyclable and compostable materials are valuable resources used to produce new products and packaging. Using recycled materials to create new products and packaging reduces demand for virgin natural resources and lowers environmental impacts from extracting them. Composting food and yard waste creates nutrient-rich soils and avoids landfilling organic materials that generate planet-warming methane emissions.

Contaminants in Seattle's residential recycling and food and yard waste bins each year **weigh over 9,800 tons, equivalent to about 1,640 orca whales**.

Contamination in the recycling bin is increasing, driven in part by the growing variety of plastic packaging causing confusion about what is recyclable.

Contamination greatly increases processing costs and reduces volume, value, and usability of finished products.

Seattle's Progress and Commitment to Reducing Contamination

Seattle requires the City's recycling and food and yard waste contain no more than 10% contaminants by volume. SPU uses a number of different methods to help reduce contamination.

Contamination: items placed in recycling or food and yard waste bins that do not meet the requirements of Seattle's recycling or compostable organics programs.

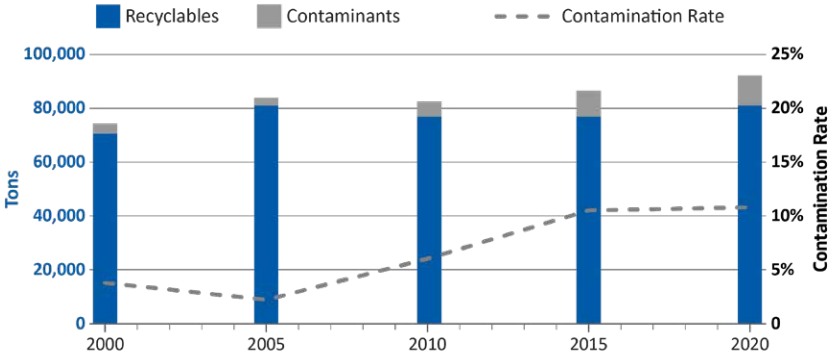
Contamination rate: percentage of collected materials, by weight, that are not accepted for recycling or composting.

To help Seattleites correctly sort their waste, SPU offers the **Where Does it Go?** online lookup tool and mailed brochures, **multilingual education materials** and bin labels, and onsite assistance for building residents and employees. Measures to reduce contaminants in the bins include bans on plastic foam and plastic bags, increased compostable or recyclable service ware requirements, and compostable product labelling requirements. SPU ensures correct sorting through:

1) Compliance Checks: Drivers conduct routine inspections to monitor sorting practices.
2) Customer Notifications: When contamination is found, customers are alerted using "Oops" tags on their bins, mailed letters, and phone calls.
3) Enforcement Measures: SPU may issue warnings, apply fines, or charge fees for contamination found in the bins.

Even with these efforts, Seattle's residential recycling contamination rate has increased from 4% to 11%, by weight, from 2000 to 2020. There is more work to be done to keep pace with the changing waste stream and customer confusion around what is recyclable and/or compostable.

Residential Recycling Tons Collected and Contamination Rate



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Community Centered, One Water, Zero Waste

Seattle Public Utilities

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in the Recycling and Food and Yard Waste

A Future with Less Contamination

Seattle will implement the contamination reduction actions outlined in the 2022 Solid Waste Plan Update and the Recycling Contamination Reduction and Outreach Plan to improve the quality of recyclable and compostable materials.

Expand customer communications and compliance to address contamination by:

- Using contamination data for targeted residential compliance outreach.
- Continuing to provide multilingual and simplified guidelines focusing on the **top 5 items** wanted in the recycling and food and yard waste bins.
- Implementing best management practices for solid waste bins, increasing monitoring of materials and tagging contaminated loads, and imposing applicable fines and penalties.
- Working with large venues and events to improve material sorting at waste stations.

Support food service businesses in choosing certified compostable packaging and improving waste sorting efforts, and ensure businesses are complying with compostable product standards and requirements to reduce contamination.

Coordinate with other Washington cities and counties to ensure clear, consistent messaging that minimizes confusion and encourages customers to recycle and compost right.

Research, pilot, promote, and **advocate for waste prevention strategies that include reuse and refill options** to replace single-use items that are either hard to recycle or create confusion and contamination.

Support planning and implementation of the state's Recycling Reform Act, which will provide funding for contamination reduction efforts, improve the recyclability of packaging, and promote reuse.

Top Contaminants in Recycling

Plastic bags and film

Food and liquids

Soiled and non-recyclable paper

Textiles

Top Contaminants in Food and Yard Waste

Non-compostable paper products

Plastic bags and film

Pet waste

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