

Recycling Glossary

With all of the different materials we can recycle and the different ways to do it, the world of recycling can seem like it uses a language of its own. This glossary will help you navigate important concepts and terms. The bold words within definitions are terms that also have been defined separately.

Aseptic carton

A rectangular, shelf-stable carton that can hold drinks, broths and other liquid food items. Though they’re mostly paper, don’t put them in your recycling: They also contain layers of plastic and aluminum in order to protect the contents from spoiling. This mix makes them more challenging to recycle, and no community program in Northwest Arkansas can accept them at this time. It’s the same situation for gable-top milk cartons.

Beverage container deposit law

Also known as a bottle bill, a law that requires a refund of a few cents for each recyclable can or bottle that residents return for recycling after use. The idea is to encourage recycling and discourage waste. You can see the refunds available in several states listed on the side of most cans and bottles. Arkansas doesn’t have this kind of law.

Bottle

A container that comes to a neck at the top that’s narrower than the base. Obvious, right? But wait – this word is actually very important when it comes to recycling plastic. Most Northwest Arkansas community recycling programs take only plastic bottles (and jugs, which are essentially bigger bottles) – no other plastic containers, including the bins that your strawberries or lettuce come in.

Circular economy

An economic system that keeps raw materials such as metal and fiber in repeated use (or loops), such as through recycling or resale, conserving natural resources and supporting jobs. Contrast with a linear economy that uses items and materials once then throws them away permanently. Communities such as Northwest Arkansas are a blend of circular and linear, with loops in place to recycle some but not all goods.

Clamshells

Hinged plastic containers for fresh produce, such as berries and lettuce, and other foods. Clamshells are often made with #1 plastic (see **resin identification code**), the same as typical water and soda **bottles**. But the manufacturing process is different, so the two categories have different chemical properties. This is why local recycling programs can’t accept clamshells.

Composting

Decomposing organic waste, such as leaves and food scraps, into an earthy mixture that can be used to improve and fertilize soil. This brings many environmental benefits, including returning nutrients to local growers and preventing some of the greenhouse gases released by rotting in a landfill. You can compost at home or by using a service connected to a larger industrial composting facility, like the one in Fayetteville. [Find out more](https://nwarecycles.org/nwas-circular-economies-the-composters/).

Contamination

Materials put into recycling systems that can’t be recycled for various reasons. Some contamination is simply the wrong stuff – regular garbage that a recycling system couldn’t take. Contamination can also be the right stuff in the wrong place: Glass bottles could be dropped off at recycling centers but cannot go into many curbsidecarts, for example. Contamination gets thrown away but can also ruin perfectly good recyclables if it’s too difficult to remove (as is the case with the grease in pizza delivery boxes). See wish-cycling.

Contract collection

Collection of waste, and recyclables in many cases, from households, businesses or other establishments by a private contractor. Most Northwest Arkansas cities will contract with companies such as CARDS, Republic Services, Orion or Waste Management for collection and hauling within city limits, but a few cities run their own hauling services instead.

Curbside

An adjective for recycling systems that pick up materials from carts and bins in front of individual homes and other buildings. The term residential often works in the same context. This setup brings convenience but also costs more than drop-off recycling and is limited by which materials can be picked up safely.

Diversion

The process of sending less waste to a landfill, such as through recycling, composting, reuse or creating less waste in the first place. You’ll often see communities measuring or setting goals for their diversion rate, or the percentage of all of their waste that is diverted.

Downcycling

A method of recycling material that degrades in each cycle, meaning it’s used to make something of lower quality. For example, plastic bottles and paper get a little weaker each time around until they can’t be recycled anymore. Contrast with recycling materials that can keep their high quality indefinitely, like glass and aluminum, and with upcycling.

Drop-off

A type of recycling where residents can bring recyclables to one or more recycling centers or receptacles. It’s a low-cost option that often can also take more types of recyclable materials than curbside, such as e-waste and household hazardous waste, with the trade-off of less convenience and a risk of contamination when no staff are present.

Dual-stream

A system of recycling that splits recyclables into two categories, typically with fiber products like paper and cardboard in one category and with bottles and cans in the other, in order to keep materials cleaner and easier to sort. This is something like a hybrid of single-stream and source-separated systems.

Electronic waste (e-waste)

Electronic devices such as cellphones and computers discarded by their owners. They contain valuable materials such as copper and steel, and they can harm the environment if thrown in the trash. Many instead should be [refurbished or recycled](https://nwarecycles.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Drop-off-guide_electronics.pdf) safely through regional solid waste management districts and other programs.

End market

The final destination of a recycled box, bottle or other item; a manufacturer who buys or otherwise accepts the material to use for making new things. Every recyclable thing needs an end market in order to be truly recycled.

Extended producer responsibility

A type of policy that aims to encourage recycling and shift waste disposal and recycling costs from the general public to manufacturers. An example is charging a fee for making non-recyclable items and putting the money into recycling programs. Most states, including Arkansas, don’t have this kind of law.

Fiber

The wood fiber that goes into paper products, including corrugated cardboard, paperboard/chipboard (the stuff of cereal boxes), newspaper and office paper. It’s also used as a category name for all of those paper products together. Fiber degrades a bit each time it’s recycled, so the same material in a strong, new cardboard box might become a flimsier paper in the next cycle or be boosted with virgin fiber.

Hierarchy of waste management

A ranking of the various ways to manage waste from most to least preferred in terms of environmental impact, such as energy saved and greenhouse gases prevented.

* Reduction – preventing waste in the first place, such as by reusing or donating items and buying in bulk for less packaging – is at the top of the list, reducing pollution and saving natural resources.
* Recycling, which processes waste into raw materials that can be reused, is the next best thing, conserving some of the energy and other resources that would go into creating brand-new metal, paper or other materials.
* Recovery of energy – burning waste as fuel, in many cases – can replace fossil fuels but still leaves behind waste such as greenhouse gases or ash that must be landfilled.
* Disposal at landfills or other facilities is at the bottom of the list. It’s regulated in order to prevent environmental harm but uses up limited space and is a one-way road for otherwise useful materials.

Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Household hazardous waste (HHW)

Household products that are toxic or otherwise dangerous if not disposed of properly. This includes such things as fluorescent lightbulbs, batteries, motor oil and pesticides. They shouldn’t go in your trash or regular recycling, but local programs through your city or regional solid waste management district will accept them and often recycle them safely.

Materials recovery facility (MRF)

A facility that takes recyclables after they’re picked up from a region’s homes or drop-off centers, then sorts and processes those recyclables in order to sell and ship them to their end markets. MRFs may specialize in certain household recyclables, construction materials or other recycling categories.

NWA Recycles

A joint effort by the nonprofit Northwest Arkansas Council and the Benton County and Boston Mountain regional solid waste management districts to help the region’s recycling work better. The effort has several priorities that include public outreach and education, helping communities and recyclers coordinate their programs, and gathering regional recycling data. Find more about the program and how to recycle where you are at [NWARecycles.org](https://nwarecycles.org/).

Recycling

The process of collecting and processing materials that would otherwise be thrown away as trash and turning them into a form that can be manufactured into new things. Distinct from reusing, which puts the same material or item to a new use without altering its character (such as turning an old or broken coffee cup into a plant pot). Cans and bottles and boxes can be recycled, but so can electronics, food and yard wastes, motor oil, tires, mattresses and other goods. See downcycling, upcycling.

Regional solid waste management districts

Local governmental regions that play essential roles in taking care of Arkansas’ solid waste, including by licensing and regulating waste haulers, handling hazardous materials, running recycling programs and providing public education. Northwest Arkansas is served by the [Benton County and Boston Mountain solid waste districts](https://www.adeq.state.ar.us/sw/programs/rswmd.aspx).

Resin identification code

A number ranging from 1 to 7 that’s stamped on plastic items, usually inside of a three-arrow recycling system, that shows what sort of plastic they’re made of. *This stamp doesn’t guarantee the plastic is recyclable*, but it can help you recycle the correct plastics in your community. Most of Northwest Arkansas’ community recycling systems take #1 or #2 plastic bottles and jugs only – no other numbers and no other kinds of containers. Many grocery stores will accept #4 plastic shopping bags, and the Rogers drop-off center will take blocks of clean, white #6 polystyrene foam packaging.

1. PET, or polyethylene terephthalate, such as in soda or water bottles.
2. HDPE, or high-density polyethylene, such as in milk jugs and laundry detergent bottles.
3. PVC, or polyvinyl chloride, such as in pipes.
4. LDPE, or low-density polyethylene, such as in plastic shopping bags.
5. Polypropylene, such as in auto parts and many food containers.
6. Polystyrene, which includes the white foamy material that’s often called Styrofoam (really the trademark name of something different).
7. Other, a catch-all for plastics that aren’t 1-6.

Single-stream

An adjective for recycling systems that allow you to throw in all of your recyclables together; also called commingled. For example, in many Northwest Arkansas cities, your cans, boxes and bottles all go into the same cart. This kind of system can be more convenient for users but can also bring more contamination. Contrast with source-separated.

Solid waste

Trash, more or less; the items and materials we throw away, including anything that ends up (or should end up) in a trash can, recycling bin or other waste receptacle and eventually is recycled or landfilled. The standard trash from households, offices and so on is also called municipal solid waste or MSW.

Source-separated

A descriptor for recycling systems that divvy up items into their different types, such as with separate receptacles for glass bottles or aluminum cans. This can happen at the curb, such as in Fayetteville’s residential recycling program, or at drop-off centers. These systems in some cases receive less recyclable material than single-stream ones but also often see less contamination.

Stream

In terms of waste, a supply or pipeline of a particular category of material. This can be specific, such as the glass or aluminum can streams, or general, such as the recycling stream overall.

Upcycling

A method of recycling where the material is used to make something of higher quality, value, or for a completely new use. For instance, old barn or boxcar wood might be used for picture frames or furniture, and one company [uses plastic bags to make new shoes](https://www.businessinsider.com/sneakers-made-from-plastic-bags-recycled-materials-thaely-india-2021-10).

Virgin material

Raw material, such as metal or plastic, that is newly manufactured and hasn’t been used for any consumer products. It’s essentially the opposite of recycled material and generally requires more energy, water or other natural resources to make.

Waste audit

An evaluation of everything a household, business or other organization throws away, which can give valuable insight into what could be recycled or reduced instead of trashed. Several private recycling and waste companies will provide this sort of service, and the regional [solid waste management districts will audit interested businesses at no charge](https://nwarecycles.org/northwest-arkansas-offers-free-service-to-help-businesses-recycle/).

Wish-cycling

Attempting to recycle items that a recycling service can’t accept in the hopes that it will still be recycled – for example, placing glass ([or more bizarre items](https://nwarecycles.org/watch-out-for-wish-cycling/)) in your curbside cart in a community that doesn’t take glass this way. Also called aspirational recycling, it simply doesn’t work. The bad stuff will be separated from the good stuff and thrown away, or, if separation is too difficult, the whole batch will be trashed. See contamination.