



Module: Recycle

Introduction

Recycle is the fourth “R” in the Region’s Waste Management Hierarchy after Rethink, Reduce, and Reuse. While recycling is an important step in managing waste, it should be considered only after the first three alternatives have been applied. It serves as the last attempt to keep items out of the garbage bag. By diverting materials to be reprocessed into something new, recycling helps conserve natural resources, save energy, and reduce pollution. By separating your recyclables, you can significantly reduce the amount of garbage your household generates.

Learning Objectives

1. Identify and define the fourth “R” – Recycle.
2. Identify acceptable and nonacceptable materials for recycling
3. Explain the benefits of Recycling.
4. Identify and describe key elements of the recycling processes.
5. Explain how residents can reduce waste.

Resource Materials (located in the resource folder)

Videos:

- Durham Region’s five “Rs”
- Food Waste Prevention Playlist
- Circular Economy

Infographics:

- 5Rs in the Waste Hierarchy
- What is a circular economy?

What is Recycling?

Recycling is the collecting and processing of materials that would otherwise be disposed of as waste and turning them into new products. This helps make the most out of the materials, reduces the need for new natural resources, and supports a circular economy. Recycling also includes composting and anaerobic digestion which are processes for converting organic materials into valuable resources.

What are the benefits of Recycling?

Recycling plays an important role in reducing waste and protecting the environment. By participating the Blue Box program, we can:

- Reduce household garbage by diverting materials away from incineration and landfill.
- Decrease pollution and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Extend the lifespan of materials.
- Conserve natural resources.

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- Delay the need to expand waste disposal infrastructure.
- Support a circular economy.

Durham's Blue Box program and Extended Producer Responsibility

For many years, Durham Region effectively managed the Blue Box program, collecting and sorting recyclable materials such as paper, cardboard, plastics, glass, and metal to prevent them from ending up in landfills or incinerators. On August 15, 2019, the Ontario Government announced that the Blue Box program would transition to an Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) model.

Under Ontario's EPR framework, the responsibility for managing recyclable materials was transferred from municipalities to producers - the companies that make, import, or sell those products. These companies are now fully responsible for the financial, operational, and regulatory aspects of recycling the materials that they sell. The goal is to motivate producers to design packaging that creates less waste and is more recyclable.

In Durham, the shift to EPR began on July 1, 2024, with residents continuing to receive the same service including a two-box system, collection schedules, and accepted materials. As of January 1, 2026, producers assumed full, province-wide responsibility for the Blue Box program. This includes collection, sorting, recycling, and reporting. Although residents will continue to use their Blue Box, the responsibility for the recycling program now rests entirely with producers, creating a more uniform system across Ontario.

Who Makes It Happen? Circular Materials

To make this system work, producers needed an organization to coordinate recycling on their behalf. That's where Circular Materials comes in. Circular Materials is one of the Producer Responsibility Organization (PRO) hired by Producers to manage the Blue Box program for them. They oversee everything from collecting and sorting to recycling and reporting, ensuring that materials are handled properly and that producers meet their obligations. Circular Materials also invests in modern recycling technology and works to create a consistent list of accepted materials across the province, making recycling easier for everyone.

What happens to blue box materials after collection?

Once recyclables are picked up from homes, they are taken to a Material Recovery Facility (MRF). At the MRF, items are sorted by type like paper, cardboard, plastics, glass, and metals. Sorting is done using machines and sometimes by hand. After sorting, the materials are cleaned and prepared for recycling. For example:

- Paper and cardboard are pulped and turned into new paper and cardboard products.
- Plastic containers are shredded, melted, and made into pellets for new plastic items.
- Metal cans are melted down and reused in manufacturing.
- Glass bottles are crushed and melted to make new glass products.

This process helps turn old materials into new products, reducing waste and saving natural resources. Under Extended Producer Responsibility, producers oversee this entire process, ensuring materials are recycled properly and encouraging products and packaging that are made from recycled materials and are easier to recycle.

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Learn More and Sort Smarter

Educators can explore Circular Materials' website at circularmaterials.ca for up-to-date information about the Blue Box program under Extended Producer Responsibility. The site includes:

- “What Goes Where” Guides – Clear lists of accepted materials and tips for proper sorting.
- Educational Resources – Videos, infographics, and downloadable materials to help teach students about recycling and waste reduction.
- Program Updates – Details on the transition timeline and new acceptable items.

Encouraging students to use these tools at home with their families helps make recycling a shared responsibility!

Closing the recycling loop

Purchasing products that have been made using recycled materials is a great way to help support a circular economy and to help close the recycling loop. When purchasing items, look for products that contain recycled content and products that can easily be recycled rather than disposable options that will end up in the garbage.

Conclusion

After Rethink, Reduce and Reuse – Recycle is a great way to decrease the amount of waste being sent for disposal. By sorting and recycling, households in Durham Region can significantly lower their waste, helping reduce pollution and greenhouse gases. This saves resources and prolong the need to expand waste management infrastructure for waste disposal such as increased energy from waste and landfill capacity. Recycling is a key step toward a sustainable future, making the environment cleaner and healthier for future generations.

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