Community Recycling Program Acceptance

Frequently Asked Questions

National Recycling Database

September 2024

The Recycling Partnership

greenblue

With the release of The Recycling Partnership's Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data, powered by the National Recycling Database, industry leaders gain access to timely and actionable data that reveals gaps in recycling program acceptance across the U.S. This data supports informed decisions on packaging design, recycling infrastructure investments, and policy development and compliance.

The FAQ below addresses key aspects of this release, explaining how the data is collected, its purpose, and how it can be used to drive improvements in recycling systems and industry practices.

National Recycling Database (Database)

How does the National Recycling Database collect data on community recycling programs?

Short Answer:

The National Recycling Database collects data on community recycling programs from multiple sources, including direct input from community managers, automated research, manual research, and input from state organizations. Data is periodically subject to inspection and review for accuracy.

Longer Answer:

Multiple data sources are consulted, which follow a data source hierarchy for review and publishing updates. The Database is updated using five primary data sources:

- Direct input from community managers verifying existing information and providing updates through the Recyclability Solutions Hub, which is then reviewed by The Partnership staff before being published.

- Direct input from community managers into the Municipal Measurement Program, which is then reviewed by The Partnership staff before being published.

- Automated research, including website screenshots, text scraping, and processing.

- Input from state organizations that survey communities and collect program information (usually annually).

- Manual research to verify that material acceptance, website links, PDFs, and program information are current.

Does the National Recycling Database calculate rates based on percentage of U.S. population or households?

The Database calculates acceptance rates using the number of occupied households. We've found no significant difference in results when using occupied households instead of population as the denominator.

How does The Partnership define a household?

The Database uses the U.S. Census American Community Survey definition and statistics of occupied households.

The definition is as follows:

- A household includes all the people who occupy a housing unit.

- A housing unit may be a house, an apartment, a mobile home, a group of rooms or a single room that is occupied (or, if vacant, intended for occupancy) as separate living quarters.

- A housing unit is classified as occupied if it is the current place of residence of the person or group of people living in it at the time of interview, or if the occupants are only temporarily absent from the residence for two months or less, that is, away on vacation or a business trip.

How does the National Recycling Database determine household population when calculating community acceptance?

The Database includes Acceptance Data for both single-family and multifamily households if the community has a documented recycling program available to residents. Each community is defined by geographic boundaries, population, number of households (categorized by number of units in each building), and demographic information.

In Acceptance Data, household populations calculate a "single-family household" as up to four (4) units in the same building, which is aligned with how most communities view residences. Multifamily includes all other housing units.

This list of communities and all associated data is updated every two years, based on the latest American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates from the Census Bureau, and every 10 years with the full census update. The next full census update is scheduled for 2030, and the Database is updated within six months of its publication.

Does the National Recycling Database include subscription services in community acceptance rates?

If a community's primary recycling service includes an opt-in or subscription-based curbside recycling program by public or private service providers, it is included in the calculation of the acceptance rate.

Does the National Recycling Database include drop-off programs in community acceptance rates?

If a community's primary recycling service is at a publicly accessible drop-off site that is advertised by the local government, it is included in the calculation of the acceptance rate. Specialty drop-off programs, including take-back and store drop-off programs, are not included in the Acceptance Data.

What are Recycling Categories in the National Recycling Database?

The Recycling Categories are the core data element of the Database. Recycling Categories are subcategories of Material Guideline Categories commonly acknowledged in community acceptance lists that include both packaging and products. The Recycling Categories need to be detailed enough so that specific packages can be tied to a single Recycling Category and the category's acceptance in a local program can be determined.

Each Recycling Category is mentioned by communities that represent at least 10% of U.S. occupied households. The specific category or example packages from the category are included in this analysis. The category can be mentioned as either accepted or prohibited by the community.

Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data (Acceptance Data)

What is the difference between access and acceptance?

Access refers to a household's ability to recycle at home, either through curbside pickup or on-site recycling bins, regardless of the specific types of material accepted. Once a local recycling program establishes access to recycling for its residents, it creates an acceptance list for specific packaging formats. Acceptance, then, is defined as whether the community takes the item in their primary recycling program.

Does the Acceptance Data show national, regional, or state-wide acceptance rates?

The Acceptance Data shows recycling rates at both the national and state levels. Published on The Partnership's website, it allows users to filter acceptance rates for all recycling categories across all 50 states.

Where can I find acceptance rates for specific materials?

Acceptance should always be considered in the context of a packaging format, rather than for a general material. An item's fate in the recycling system depends on the combination of its material, shape, size, weight, and other design characteristics, and although our recycling systems treat many formats of the same material in similar ways, the fullest relationship between packaging design and the recycling system should be assessed.

Why does acceptance matter?

To understand how to improve and expand the residential recycling system, it is essential to first understand the types of items that it is designed to handle. By publishing this data, we are seeking to decrease complexity, bring clarity, and increase investments where system gaps exist and need to be addressed.

Is acceptance the main factor in an item's recyclability?

Acceptance is one pillar in assessing recyclability, but it is not the sole determinant. A comprehensive assessment of an item's recyclability includes factors that address material health, acceptance, MRF compatibility, reprocessor compatibility, and market demand. Ideally, acceptance rates should reflect the compatibility of an item with the downstream recycling system.

Recyclability should be assessed using one of several available comprehensive frameworks. These frameworks vary in their definitions, thresholds, and boundaries, but they share a common approach in accounting for the multiple junctures of our recycling system. Two prominent frameworks are the How2Recycle Guide to Recyclability and the Residential Recyclability Framework. Recyclability definitions may also increasingly differ by state under emerging Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legislation.

Material Health	Acceptance	MRF Compatibility	Reprocessor Compatibility	Market Demand

How can I track an item's acceptance rate? Will the Acceptance Data track changes to an item's acceptance over time?

The Acceptance Data webpage will be updated at least twice a year. This publication is considered the baseline data, and future publications will show changes over time.

How will a change in an item's acceptance rate affect How2Recycle® recyclability assessment and label?

Changes to acceptance rates may affect How2Recycle recyclability assessments and assigned labels for on-pack usage. How2Recycle recyclability assessment decisions will be based on acceptance rate trends over time to improve stability and accuracy. Each material format presents its own unique challenges and considerations, and adjustments may be made on a case-by-case basis. In the event of any potential changes, How2Recycle members will be notified in advance and given a sufficient grace period to make any necessary updates to their labels to comply with the new standards.

If an item is accepted in a collection program, does that mean it will get recycled?

The recycling community is motivated to derive value from as much collected material as possible. However, multiple economic and operational variables can influence whether a specific type of packaging will be targeted for recycling after it is collected. To simplify messaging, a community may signal acceptance of a broad packaging category (e.g., "plastics") that includes subcategories of materials without an end market. Conversely, some items get recycled despite a lack of messaging by community programs: Acceptance may not be advertised for a material that is only suitable for the recycling system in the small volumes a MRF receives incidentally.

Why don't collection programs accept the same items?

While it seems that recycling should be standardized, there are good reasons why community recycling programs currently vary in their acceptance of different packaging types. Collected recyclables are ultimately marketed as commodities to surrounding end markets, which vary in their acceptance of different items due to their different technologies, business models, customer needs, and product offerings. Acceptance lists can even differ between neighboring communities, which may send recyclables to different MRFs or may have received different instructions from a shared MRF that wants to meter the inbound volume of a specific item.

What is the difference between explicit and implicit acceptance?

Explicit acceptance refers to when a recycling program specifically lists a Recycling Category as accepted.

Implicit acceptance occurs when broader terms are used to describe accepted materials, without specifically naming the Recycling Category, but implying it is included.

How are acceptance rates calculated?

Acceptance rates are based on both explicit and implicit acceptance, as recorded in the Database. If a material is explicitly or implicitly accepted, it contributes to the overall acceptance rate.

When is implicit acceptance included in acceptance rates?

Implicit acceptance is only evaluated for inclusion if at least 10% of communities explicitly accept the Recycling Category. If explicit acceptance is below 10%, it's assumed there's not enough evidence to confirm that programs intend to accept the material, so implicit acceptance is excluded from the acceptance rate.

Recycling Categories are generally included in the broader Material Guideline Category if communities commonly group them together, unless there are known barriers to MRF acceptance or end-market prohibitions.

Why is the distinction between explicit and implicit acceptance important?

Specificity is crucial for Material Recycling Facilities (MRFs) and industry studies that track material recycling rates. Innovative packaging formats may require explicit acceptance to ensure they are recognized by recycling programs.

Can a material be considered accepted even if it's not listed explicitly?

Yes. For example, if a recycling program lists "mixed paper" as accepted, but does not list "office paper" separately, office paper would still be accepted under the broader category unless it is explicitly excluded. How2Recycle reserves the right to assess specific packaging for labels.

Can I send in data for the Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data Release?

We invite trade associations and companies to pursue their own research in support of a reconsideration of the acceptance rates listed in the most up-to-date version of the Acceptance Data. Please review Understanding Community Recycling Program Acceptance for more detail and then reach out to The Recycling Partnership at **datateam@recyclingpartnership.org** and/or How2Recycle at **how2recycle@greenblue.org.**

What are the published related documents for this Acceptance Data publication?

- [Methodology for How2Recycle's Integration of the National Recycling Database's Community Recycling Program Acceptance Data](#)

- [Understanding Community Recycling Program Acceptance](#)

- [National Recycling Database Community Recycling Program Acceptance Taxonomy Overview](#)

- [National Recycling Database Methodology Overview](#)