What Happens to my Recycling?

The Recycling Process

It is well known that recycling is an important way to reduce the amount of waste produced, and to find new uses for old products. What is less well known is just what happens once our recycling is placed in our yellow-lid bin, and the types of new products that can be made from this material.

All the material deposited in a recycling bin is taken to a factory known as a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF). From there, materials are sorted into categories by workers and machines, and are baled together into large cubes before being reprocessed often at new individual facilities. It is during this process that 'contaminants' which cannot be recycled (such as plastic bags) are separated, at significant time and expense.

Plastics

Hard plastics including bottles, shampoo containers and tubs are the most commonly found recyclable materials that are thrown into the garbage bin. As one of the most damaging environmental contaminants, it is critical that these plastics are recycled at a high rate. All hard plastic material is melted down into a fine flake or a collection of pellets, and remoulded into a wide range of items including new bottles, furniture and packaging. The energy required to recycle these materials is half of what it takes to dispose of old plastic through incineration.

Glass

Glass bottles and jars are one of the most reuseable materials available, and can be recycled continuously with minimal impacts on quality and purity. Glass is sorted according to its chemical composition, and can also be melted down into a sand substitute or a range of building materials such as fibreglass insulation. The use of recycled glass is particularly important in reducing our carbon footprint. One tonne of recycled glass avoids over 300 kg of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere from the production of new glass.

Aluminium

Aluminium is a metal made from bauxite through a complicated series of processes. Because a lot of energy goes into the production of new aluminium, it is important that items such as soft drink cans and foil trays are recycled, as these are critical to saving resources. A can made from recycled aluminium uses up to 95% less energy than creating a new can from bauxite. Reprocessed aluminium can be made into a wide range of items, including cans, car parts and window frames.

Steel

Steel is the most commonly recycled metal in the world. For over 100 years, the steel industry has been reprocessing steel to save valuable resources and to save on operational costs. Items ranging from soup and aerosol cans to car bodies are regularly melted down at steel refineries into a liquid metallic iron that is integrated into the production of new steel. Most new steel products contain around 20% recycled content.

Paper and Cardboard

Paper and cardboard are two of the most commonly recycled materials, particularly old newspapers, office paper, pizza boxes and magazines. These items are often reprocessed into new cardboard packaging, toilet paper and hand towels and reconstituted newspaper material.

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