Let's Move "Beyond the Bin"!

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A review of 18 major studies finds plastic recycling has structural limits that collection drives and recyclability labels cannot fix, and points to reuse as the more credible alternative — REUSE Foundation Calls for us to Move "Beyond the Bin"

A new report from REUSE Foundation finds that despite decades of public messaging urging households to sort their plastic waste, only 9% of the plastic produced worldwide in 2022 — the most recent year with comprehensive data — was ultimately recycled.

The report, *Beyond the Bin: What the Evidence Tells Us About Plastic Recycling, and What Comes Next*, synthesizes findings from 18 reports spanning academic research, intergovernmental data, environmental investigations and industry analysis. It concludes that the gap between what is collected for recycling and what is actually recycled is substantial, shows no sign of closing, and reflects structural limitations in the system rather than a lack of effort by households.

Key findings include:

- Worldwide, 400 million tonnes of plastic were produced in 2022, generating 268 million tonnes of waste. Less than 28% of that waste was sorted and collected for recycling, and of that, only just over half was actually recycled — around 14% of total plastic waste generated. The rest was incinerated (34%), sent to landfill (39%), traded or mismanaged (often leaked to the environment or burnt in open fires)
- In the United States, the situation is worse still: analysis by Greenpeace USA found the actual plastic recycling rate has fallen to just 5–6%, down from 9.5% in 2014. Even the country's two most viable recycling markets, PET #1 and HDPE #2 plastics, have processing capacity for only around a fifth of the waste generated in those categories.
- Collection is not a reliable proxy for recycling. In Germany, for example, 99% of plastic waste is collected, but only 39% is actually recycled — around 60% is rejected during sorting due to contamination and mostly incinerated instead, according to the BBC.
- The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) projects that, without significant policy change, the share of recycled plastic in total global plastic production will remain roughly unchanged at around 6% through 2040 — even as investment in recycling infrastructure continues.
- "Recyclable" labelling frequently misrepresents real-world outcomes. A UK investigation by the Environmental Investigation Agency into supermarket soft-plastic takeback schemes found that none of the material tracked was recycled in a closed loop; around 70% of it was incinerated, with the remainder downcycled, mostly overseas.
- So-called "advanced" or chemical recycling, increasingly promoted as a solution, has limited evidence of effectiveness at scale. Research cited in the report found that only 1–14% of plastic processed via pyrolysis or gasification could become new plastic feedstock, and that 11 advanced recycling facilities built in the US could, even at full capacity, process less than 1.3% of the plastic waste the country generates annually.

The report finds that plastic recycling became the default response to plastic waste not primarily because it worked, but because it served the interests of plastic producers and users, citing documented industry acknowledgement, dating back decades, of doubts about recycling's economic viability.

One of the reports reviewed, *The Fraud of Plastic Recycling* (2024), by Center for Climate Integrity points out that "Underpinning this plastic waste crisis is a decades-long campaign of fraud and deception about the recyclability of plastics."

Rather than concentrating further effort on recycling, the report points to reuse, systems that keep packaging in circulation rather than discarding it after a single use, as a more credible alternative. It cites modelling by Pew Charitable Trusts showing that an ambitious, reuse-inclusive scenario could reduce annual global plastic pollution by 83% by 2040, with reuse responsible for two-thirds of the projected drop

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in packaging waste specifically.

Separate research by the Ellen MacArthur Foundation found that reusable packaging systems can also deliver cost savings once they reach scale, alongside their environmental benefits.

REUSE Foundation argues that with 2025's UN Plastic Treaty negotiations having failed to reach agreement, governments, companies, investors and consumers each have a role to play in driving the shift toward reuse in the absence of binding global policy.

"It's time we all — corporations, policy makers, consumers and investors — moved beyond the bin," the report concludes.

The full report, including all sources and methodology, is available at reusefoundation.org.

About REUSE Foundation

REUSE Foundation works to advance evidence-based solutions to the global plastic waste crisis, including scalable reuse and returnable packaging systems, through independent research and analysis. For more information, visit reusefoundation.org and see our publications here

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