



## Recycling Rate Price Increase Frequently Asked Questions

Prepared by Department of Public Works, Solid Waste Division  
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Thank you for your interest in the recent price increases to recycling rates. Following is a list of the questions that are answered below.

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### Frequently Asked Questions

#### Q: Who collects most of the recyclable materials in Thurston County?

A: In Thurston County, private waste hauling companies (Pacific Disposal, Rural Refuse, and Joe's Refuse) owned by Waste Connections collect most of the recyclable materials. The exception is the City of Olympia, which collects recyclable materials from residents and businesses within the city. Thurston County government does not provide collection services for trash or recycling. However, citizens may drop off recyclable materials free of charge at any of the County's three solid waste management facilities.

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**Q: What recyclable materials are collected in Thurston County?**

**A:** Thurston County code establishes minimum standards for collection of residential recyclable materials. According to these standards, collection of recyclable materials from residences in the County must include the following items:

- Cardboard
- Steel and aluminum cans
- Mixed paper and newspaper
- Glass bottles and jars
- Plastic bottles, jars, and dairy containers.

Waste Connections' program requires glass to be set out separately from all other recyclable materials. The City of Olympia's program allows for all recyclable materials to be mixed together in one container for collection.

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**Q: What happens to recyclable materials after they are collected from the curb?**

**A:** Recyclable materials are transported to processing facilities known as "MRFs" or material recovery facilities, where these materials are separated by type and baled or containerized. These separated materials are sold in worldwide markets as commodities for use as raw materials in manufacturing. Most of the recyclable materials collected in the County are transported to a MRF in Tacoma operated by Pioneer Recycling.

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**Q: What has happened recently to markets for recyclable materials?**

**A:** Over the past 15 years the U.S. has exported 30 percent or more of their recyclable materials overseas, particularly to China. Over the past year, China has imposed strict import regulations for recyclable materials. Because U.S. residents and businesses are still collecting the same amount of recyclable materials this has resulted in an increase in supply throughout the markets.

So far, domestic manufacturers have not been able to absorb this increase. This has led to major drops in the value of most recyclable materials. In areas where recycling has become more expensive than disposal, some of these materials are being landfilled instead of recycled. As a result, some areas have stopped accepting certain recyclable materials. For example, glass, which has historically been costly to handle and difficult to sell, has been removed from many collection programs.

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**Q: How has the drop in the value of recyclable materials affected us in Thurston County?**

**A:** Operating costs have increased for Waste Connections and Pioneer Recycling due to efforts to remove contamination. These increased costs are being passed on to customers. Most residents and businesses in Thurston County that have their recyclable materials collected by a private hauler, have seen increases in their service costs of 5% or more. Incorporated jurisdictions and organizations with collection contracts are likely to incorporate a price increase to cover costs.

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**Q: Why did Pacific Disposal/LeMay/Waste Connections increase my recycling rate on my bill?**

**A:** Recently, Pacific Disposal/LeMay residential customers received a letter in the mail explaining there would be an increase to recycling collection rates due to China's new import regulations. These regulations forced sorting and processing facilities (like Waste Connections and Pioneer Recycling Services) to find other markets to send these materials. However, it now costs more money to process the recyclable materials than when they exported them to China in the past, and the market value of these commodities has decreased significantly.

Pacific Disposal's/LeMay's invoice for curbside collection includes charges for a "Recycling Program Adjustment" and a "Recyclables Value." The "Recycling Program Adjustment" is the cost for your collector to pick up your recyclable materials at the curb and haul it to a processing facility. The "Recyclables Value" is the cost of processing those recyclable materials, which has historically been offset by the sale of these materials. In the past, your bill likely reflected a credit on your invoice under "Recyclables Value" because recyclable materials were sold to China and were worth more than they are now. Due to stricter quality requirements of the recyclable materials from the new domestic markets, sorting facilities have had to slow down sorting lines and hire additional staff. Both the increased cost to process and the low value of the recyclable materials are reasons why your bill now reflects a cost under "Recyclables Value" instead of a credit back to you.

The Washington Utilities and Transportation Commission (WUTC) is charged, among other things, with reviewing and approving the rates that collection companies charge residential customers for garbage and recycling collection services. The WUTC has recently approved rate increases for collection companies throughout Washington because of increased costs for processing recyclable materials and decreased market value.

We have spoken with a Pacific Disposal/LeMay customer service representative and were advised that under their current billing structure, the cost of garbage collection is more expensive than recycling collection. However, you may have options to potentially reduce the overall costs of your collection service by contacting your provider about a smaller garbage container or alternative frequency of service.

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**Q: Are the recyclable materials collected in Thurston County still being recycled?**

**A:** Most of the recyclable materials collected in the County by Waste Connections or dropped off by residents at the County's solid waste facilities are transported to Waste Connection's recycling facility in Lacey or the Pioneer MRF in Tacoma for processing. Waste Connections and Pioneer representatives indicate that they have successfully secured markets for all collected recyclables. They continue to actively seek domestic markets for these recyclable materials.

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**Q: Is it a requirement that I have to sign up for recycling service to my home?**

**A:** County Code requires that companies provide recycling collection to all residential customers that receive garbage collection, but there is no regulation that requires you to recycle. However, regulations require that recycling collection costs be distributed throughout the service area to all single-family rate payers. As a result, the WUTC-approved rate structure is such that the cost of garbage collection with recycling is the same as the cost of garbage collection without recycling.

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**Q: What can citizens do in response to these market disruptions?**

**A:** We must all remember that recycling is a service, and this service will likely cost more in the future. We can however, do several things to limit these cost increases by:

- Learning what acceptable recyclable materials are and put only those materials into recycling bins.
- Buying products that can easily be recycled
- Buying goods with no packaging at all.

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**Q: What if I have additional questions?**

**A:** Please contact your hauler directly with any questions or issues regarding your collection service or to obtain information about acceptable and unacceptable materials. You can contact Thurston County Public Works, Solid Waste Division about the services provided at the County's Waste and Recovery Center or Drop Boxes by calling (360) 867-2491 or visiting our website at [ThurstonSolidWaste.org](http://ThurstonSolidWaste.org).

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