

FEBRUARY 2019

What Happens to Your Recyclables at the NIH?



One of the easiest ways for NIH staff to reduce solid waste generation while at work is through recycling. The NIH is required to recycle by various federal, state and local laws and HHS and NIH policies. The success of these recycling programs is largely dependent on the actions of NIH staff. In an effort to encourage recycling throughout the NIH, we are going to answer a commonly-heard question: What happens to your recyclables after the recycle bin?

To begin, recyclables are collected in designated recycling bins throughout NIH buildings. On the Bethesda campus, the recyclables are then taken to Building 25, where they are sorted by material (glass, plastic, metal or paper) and prepared for shipment. The process for collecting recyclables is similar at other NIH locations; however, the sorting will likely occur at an off-site location.

The journey for recyclables from the NIH is similar to public recycling streams. Sorted recyclables (by material) are often further sorted once they arrive at the processing facility. For example, glass is sorted by color and plastic is sorted by type (the number inside the recycling symbol).¹ Glass, plastic and aluminum is crushed or shredded, then melted and used to create new materials.¹ Paper must be sorted based on its type/grade and is then mixed in a vat with water to form "slurry."¹ The slurry is spread on racks and rolled to push out the water.¹ This slurry product is the main component in paperboard, cardboard and newsprint, but can also be combined with wood or cotton fibers to form office-grade paper.¹ Recycled items are generally used to manufacture specific new items based on their material. Here are a few items that can be created using recycled material:

- Glass can be used to make new glass containers, tile flooring, and concrete pavement.¹ Glass is capable of being recycled endlessly without loss in quality.²
- Plastic can be divided into two categories:
 - * Rigid plastics can be recycled into a variety of products based on whether they are #1 (new plastic containers, carpet and surfboards), #3 (drainage piping, fencing and house siding) or #5 plastic (furniture, batteries and recycling containers).¹
 - * Soft plastics and plastic films, such as #2 and #4 plastics, are used to create plastic lumber, garbage bags, plastic toys and traffic cones.¹
- Aluminum is recycled to form new aluminum cans, vehicle parts, wires and electronics.¹ Using recycled aluminum to produce aluminum cans saves 95% of the energy that would be needed to produce cans from unrefined ore.³
- Paper is used to create new paper products, cardboard, newsprint and paperboard (depending on the type/grade of the paper).¹ Paper can only be recycled a finite number of times due to degradation of the paper fibers.¹ Paper that is beginning to degrade is used for insulation, animal bedding and compost.¹

The best way for you to help improve recycling at the NIH is by learning proper disposal methods and teaching them to others. The NIH provides information about proper recycling, such as signage on recycling bins, the [NIH Waste Disposal Guide](#) and the [Recycle Right Campaign flyer](#). The Recycle Right Campaign is described in detail in our "Take Action" article. If you have any questions regarding recycling on the NIH Bethesda campus, please contact the Recycling Coordinator, [Ms. Tierra Robinson](#). Ms. Robinson can also provide 15-30 minute waste consultations for recycling and all other types of waste generated on campus, including lab waste. Questions regarding recycling at other NIH locations should be directed to the individual [listed here](#) or to the building manager.

TAKE ACTION



The ORF/ORS Green Team's Recycle Right Campaign

The Recycle Right Campaign was created to increase the understanding of proper recycling protocol amongst NIH staff. This program seeks to increase the amount of recyclables from NIH cafeterias by reducing contamination of these items. Read the full article to learn how you can contribute!

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT



Thermo Fisher Scientific Styrofoam Return Program at Building 50 (Bethesda Campus)

Dr. Mary Ellen Urick facilitated the creation of a Styrofoam return program in Building 50 on the Bethesda campus. This program allows Thermo Fisher Scientific to collect Styrofoam packaging for reuse in future shipments. Read the full article to learn about this new program!

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NEMS TRAINING

Did you know? In recent years, the NIH has diverted over 50% of non-hazardous waste from landfills. We can still do better! To learn more about recycling at the NIH, please visit the [NEMS Training webpage](#) to view a short (20 minute) NIH environmental awareness training video.