

Only half of packaging waste is recycled – here's how to do better

28 February 2019, by Ben Madden And Nick Florin

Waste Packaging Stream	Generated Packaging Waste (T)	Recovered Incl. Exports And Stockpiles (T)	Recovery Rate
Total Packaging	4,422,845	2,491,278	56% ±17%
Glass	1,292,016	641,372	50% ±8%
Paper	2,052,052	1,470,186	72% ±13%
Unbleached	1,274,250	909,010	71% ±13%
Mixed	776,923	561,176	72% ±13%
Metal	171,375	92,217	54% ±10%
Aluminium	61,559	44,059	72% ±13%
Steel	109,816	48,158	44% ±8%
Plastic	907,401	287,502	32% ±4%
PET	138,585	40,764	29% ±5%
HDPE	328,727	96,883	29% ±4%
PVC	17,014	4,794	28% ±3%
LDPE	220,148	61,518	28% ±4%
PP	101,464	27,156	27% ±4%
PS	26,913	8,022	30% ±4%
Other	74,551	48,365	65% ±7%

Total amounts of packaging waste generated and recovered in Australia for the 2017-18 financial year. Credit: APCO/UTS ISF

Almost half of Australia's packaging waste is not being recovered for recycling, according to the first comprehensive study to track the fate of used packaging materials.

Overall, 56% of [packaging](#) was recovered for [recycling](#) in 2017-18, according to our [study](#), carried out at the UTS Institute for Sustainable Futures and published by the [Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation](#), a not-for-profit group that aims to reduce the environmental impact of packaging and is leading the effort to implement the [National Packaging Targets](#).

Only 32% of plastic packaging was recovered for recycling, whereas the figure for paper and cardboard was 72%.

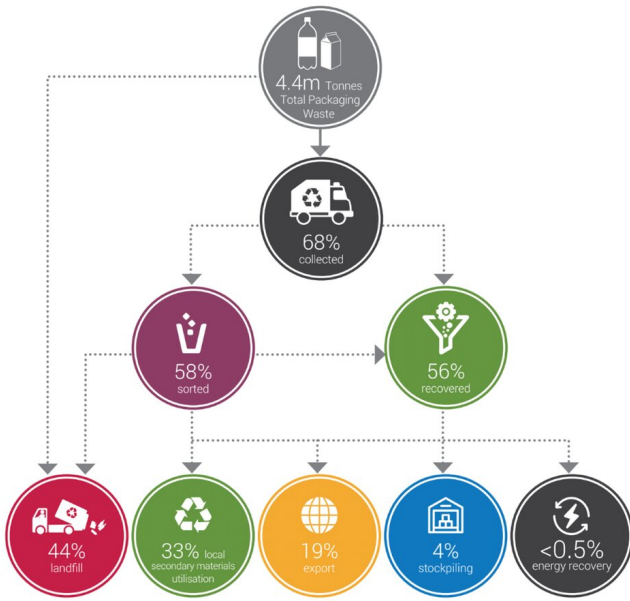
Used [packaging materials](#) such as glass, paper, metal and plastic make up 15% of all recyclable waste generated in Australia, according to our calculations based on [available government data](#). By taking a snapshot of our current performance in recovering these materials, we can identify which

areas are most in need of attention. This will help us work towards a "circular economy" approach in which packaging materials are reclaimed, reused and recycled, rather than thrown away.

The chart below shows that the most significant losses to landfill happen before waste is collected for sorting. Households and businesses are still throwing recyclable packaging, approximately 32% of total packaging consumed, into red bins instead of into recycling.

The 56% recovery figure includes packaging material recovered for export, as well as materials that are [currently stockpiled](#). This includes glass which is not currently in high demand for local manufacturing.

Waste exported overseas represents a significant proportion – about 34% – of total packaging waste recovered. Evidently, there is a clear opportunity to improve local waste management practices and grow local demand for products that contain recycled materials. This would help make Australia's packaging system more resilient to fluctuations in global markets.



The fate of Australia's recyclables. Credit: APCO/UTS ISF

The biggest recent market shock was the recycling crisis sparked by China's decision to limit the imports of large amounts of recyclable materials.

In April last year, state and federal environment ministers and local governments reacted to that crisis with the [launch of the National Packaging Targets](#). This included a pledge to pursue circular economy principles.

In practice, this means avoiding packaging waste, improving local recovery of recyclables, and increasing the demand for products that contain recycled materials. Already we have seen major brands such as [Unilever](#) commit to using at least 25% locally sourced recycled plastic in packaging such as shampoo bottles. This is a big step in the right direction, and aligns with the [trending global agenda to eliminate plastic pollution](#).

However, developing a circular economy for packaging in Australia requires coordinated action across the whole supply chain. This includes manufacturers, brand owners, consumers, and the resource recovery sector.

Better source separation is important and this requires consumer education and awareness raising, as well as smarter design of packaging to make it easier to recycle. These strategies are already supported by the new [Australasian Recycling Label](#), which could potentially be mandated for all types of packaging.

A further consequence of better source separation is a reduction in the contamination of the collected [materials](#). This would improve the efficiency of the material recovery facilities (MRFs) that sort the mixed recyclables into separate streams for reprocessing.

What we also need is more and better data on packaging consumption and recycling infrastructure capabilities. Some future actions are clear, such as addressing problematic plastic packaging. Others decisions that might involve broad systemic interventions need more information about the best way to encourage packaging circularity. Key to success will be the willingness of all stakeholders to develop a collective, consistent and proactive approach to information sharing and problem solving.

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