

Recycling

Recycling is the process of converting waste materials into new materials and objects. The recyclability of a material depends on its ability to reacquire the properties it had in its virgin or original state. It is an alternative to “conventional” waste disposal that can save material and help lower greenhouse gas emissions. Recycling can prevent the waste of potentially useful materials and reduce the consumption of fresh raw materials, thereby reducing: energy usage, air pollution (from incineration), and water pollution (from landfilling). Recycling is a key component of modern waste reduction and is the third component of the “Reduce, Reuse, and Recycle” waste hierarchy. Thus, recycling aims at environmental sustainability by substituting raw material inputs into and redirecting waste outputs out of the economic system. Recyclable materials include many kinds of glass, paper, cardboard, metal, plastic, tires, textiles, batteries, and electronics. The composting or other reuse of biodegradable waste—such as food or garden waste—is also a form of recycling. Materials to be recycled are either delivered to a house-

hold recycling center or picked up from curbside bins, then sorted, cleaned, and reprocessed into new materials destined for manufacturing new products. In the strictest sense, recycling of a material would produce a fresh supply of the same material—for example, used office paper would be converted into new office paper or used polystyrene foam into new polystyrene. This is accomplished when recycling certain types of materials, such as metal cans, which can become a can again and again, indefinitely, without losing purity in the product. However, this is often difficult or too expensive (compared with producing the same product from raw materials or other sources), so “recycling” of many products or materials involves their reuse in producing different materials (for example, paperboard) instead. Another form of recycling is the salvage of certain materials from complex products, either due to their intrinsic value (such as lead from car batteries, or gold from printed circuit boards), or due to their hazardous nature (e.g., removal and reuse of mercury from thermometers and thermostats).