



Glossary of Waste Reduction Terms

Baler: A machine used to compress materials into bundles to reduce volume.

Biodegradable: Capable of being broken down by microorganisms, such as fungi and bacteria, into simple compounds that can be absorbed by the environment.

Bottle Bill: A law, passed in some states, which requires that the price of a beverage container include a refundable deposit. The deposit is refunded to the consumer when the bottle or can is returned to the retailer.

Buy Back Center: Business set up to purchase recyclable materials from the public.

Byproduct: Excess material or waste produced in addition to the primary product.

Centralized Resource Recovery: Process in which collected recyclable materials are taken to a central location to be processed.

Closed-Loop Recycling: Taking an old product, reprocessing it and making it into a new product of the same kind – like an aluminum can.

Closed System: A system in which nothing comes in and nothing leaves. For example, the earth is a closed system - nothing comes in except energy in the form of heat and light from the sun, and nothing leaves except heat and reflected light.

Commercial Waste: Refuse from traders, businesses, sport recreation or entertainment premises.

Commingled Materials: A mix of several recyclables collected in one container.

Compaction: The act or process of pressing material together to occupy the smallest volume possible.

Compost: Decomposed organic material that results from the process of composting. It is used to enrich or improve soil for growing.

Composting: The natural conversion of most organic materials by active microorganisms, resulting in a soil-like component called "compost".

Conservation: The preservation of natural resources. Consumer: A person who buys goods or services for personal consumption, rather than for resale.

Consumption: The amount of any product or resource (material or energy) used in a given time by a given number of consumers.

Contamination: The process of adding one substance to another substance, such as motor oil to water, that reduces its quality; to make impure or unsafe by contact with potentially harmful substances.

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Contract: An agreement, pledge, or bond to accomplish something.

Curbside Collection: Programs where recyclable materials are set out, often in special containers, and collected at the curb, to be brought to processing facilities.

Decompose: To break down organic waste materials by bacteria and fungi; to rot or decay.

Decomposition: The process of decomposing, or being broken down into simpler components by active microorganisms.

Deforestation: The clearing and removal of trees from a forested area.

Dirty MRF: A materials reclamation facility in which unseparated MSW is processed to recover recyclables.

Disposable: Designed to be thrown away after a single use or within a short time.

Downcycle: To make new, but different products from used ones.

Drop-off Center: A collection site to which individuals take their recyclable trash and deposit it in specially designated containers.

Dump: A site where waste is disposed of in an unmanaged, uncovered area.

Durable: Goods that can be used more than once and withstand long use, wear and decay.

Ecosystem: An ecological community, together with its environment, functioning as one unit.

Efficiency: The ratio of the effective or useful output to the total input in any system.

Environment: The circumstances and conditions that surround living organisms, including soil, water, plants, animals and buildings

Garbage: Material that has been discarded because it is worn out, used up or no longer needed. Many things thrown away could be recycled or reused.

Grasscycling: Source reduction activity in which grass clippings are left on the lawn after mowing. The practice consists of mowing grass so it is never more than two to three inches tall. The grass clippings are left where they fall and allowed to decompose, returning nutrients to the lawn.

Ground Water: Water that sinks into the through the soil to be stored underground; large underground storage areas are called aquifers.

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Hauler: A garbage collection company that offers a complete refuse removal service. Most serve as collectors of recyclables as well.

Hazardous: Materials that are dangerous to handle or dispose of; hazardous materials include substances that are toxic, flammable, corrosive, infectious or radioactive.

Household Hazardous Waste: Small quantities of unused or leftover products used in the home that become waste and can be harmful to the environment if not properly disposed of. Oil-based paints, pesticides and some cleaners are examples of HHW. Caution must be taken when handling, storing or disposing of these products.

Incinerator: A furnace or apparatus designed to reduce the volume of waste by burning it.

Integrated Waste Management: A recommended approach to solid waste management that involves the complementary use of source reduction, recycling and composting prior to landfilling or incinerating waste.

Landfill: A specially engineered land site for disposing of solid waste in the ground.

Landfill Gases: A natural by-product of decomposing organic matter consisting mostly of methane and carbon dioxide.

Leachate: Rainfall that has penetrated through the solid waste in a landfill. It contains dissolved or suspended materials that could contaminate ground or surface water if not collected and treated.

Life Cycle: The complete cycle of events occurring over the lifetime of an animate or inanimate object. A product life cycle is the series of steps involved in manufacturing; distributing; using; reusing; recycling or ultimately disposing of a product.

Litter: Waste materials that are carelessly discarded in an inappropriate place or that escape from waste-handling systems.

Market: A place where products are sold; in recycling, the company that purchases recycled commodities for use in manufacturing new products.

Materials Reclamation Facility: A place where recyclable materials are sorted and processed – known as a MRF.

Municipal Solid Waste: Municipal solid waste includes all materials typically disposed of in dumpsters by businesses and institutions and removed for offsite disposal by private haulers. Also see “waste stream”.

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Natural Resources: Materials created by nature that are either useful or necessary for life. Examples are wood, water, and minerals.

Non-Biodegradable: Not able to decompose or break down naturally.

Non-Renewable Resources: Natural materials that are considered finite or exhaustible due to their limited supply, their scarcity, time required for their formation and their rapid depletion. Oil, minerals, and natural gas are examples.

Non-Toxic: A substance that does not have the capacity to produce personal injury or illness to humans through ingestion, inhalation, or skin absorption.

Open Dump: An uncovered space used for depositing municipal garbage, and often a source of sanitation and health problems. Most open dumps have been replaced by modern sanitary landfills that cover waste and contain environmental controls to prevent contamination of the surrounding areas.

Open System: A system in which matter and energy come in and out but not in a balanced way. Matter and energy may be wasted or dispersed, and more importantly, resources are depleted.

Organic: Derived from the animal or vegetable world (living organisms) or containing carbon compounds.

Pallet: A wooden platform used with a forklift for moving bales or other large items. It is also called a skid.

Pollutant: A liquid, gas, dust or solid material that causes contamination of air, water, earth and living organ

Pollution Prevention: eliminating waste before it is created. Processing: The operations performed on recycled materials to render them reusable or marketable. Processing has two functions, to separate and to add value to a particular material.

Product Life Cycle: The predictable stages through which a product passes from its origin to the end of its useful life.

Recyclable: Material that still has useful physical or chemical properties after serving its original purpose and can be reused or remanufactured to make new products. Plastic, paper, glass, steel and aluminum cans, used oil are examples of such materials.

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Reclaimed: Made from material that is being reused, but in a different form. Halfway between being reused and being recycled the reclaimed materials are changed from its previous form, but not entirely reprocessed.

Recycling: The process by which materials are collected and reprocessed so that the raw materials can be used for new products.

Recycled-Content: Is the percentage of material a product is made from that has been recovered from consumers in the municipal solid waste stream (post-consumer content) plus any industrial materials salvaged for reuse (pre-consumer content).

Reduce: To use less of; to decrease in extent, amount, number or other quantity.

Renewable Resources: A naturally occurring raw material or form of energy derived from an endless or cyclical source like the sun, wind, falling water (hydroelectric), plants and animals.

Refurbish: To repair, clean and make useful again. Some electronic manufacturing companies and other businesses take back used equipment, refurbish it and sell it again.

Reuse: To extend the life of an item by using it more than once, repairing or modifying it, or by creating new uses for it.

Solid Waste: Any unwanted materials, either solid or semi-solid, which is discarded from households, industries or communities.

Source Reduction: Any change in the design, manufacture, purchase or use of materials or products (including packaging) to reduce their amount or toxicity before they become municipal solid waste.

Source Separation: The sorting of waste materials at the point of generation; removing and separating recyclable materials at home, school or business.

Sustainability: Is the ability to keep our ecosystem going over time, taking from the earth and giving back to the earth in balance

Sustainable: That which is made, used, and disposed of in such a way that it could continue to be made, used, and disposed of again and again indefinitely.

Tipping Fee: The charge made for unloading waste at a landfill, incinerator, or recycling center.

Toxic: Containing compounds that pose a substantial threat to human health and/or the environment.

Transported: Taken from one place to another, usually by truck, car, train, barge or airplane.

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Trash: Items made or used by people that are discarded because they are considered worthless, unnecessary or offensive.

Waste Audit: An inventory of the amount and type of waste that is produced by a specific location.

Waste Prevention: The design, manufacture, purchase or use of materials or products to reduce their amount or toxicity before they enter the municipal solid waste stream.

Waste Reduction: Preventing and or decreasing the amount of waste being generated either through waste prevention, recycling, composting, or buying recycled and reduced-waste products.

Waste Stream: The collective term for the waste disposed of by a community, also known as municipal solid waste (MSW).

Waste-to-Energy: The process of burning waste to produce energy/electricity.

Vermi-Composting: Indoors, in a contained bin, it is the process of using “red wiggler” worms and microorganisms (like bacteria, protozoa, molds and fungi) to convert organic waste (fruit and vegetable scraps) into black, nutrient-rich soil, excellent for new plant growth. Worms feed on the organic wastes and the bedding. Vermi-composting can help reduce household and institutional food scrap that goes to a landfill.

Yard Waste: Grass clippings, leaves and tree trimmings from yards and landscaped areas.

Credit: *Compiled for the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity’s Recycling Works: A Toolkit for Reducing Waste in the Workplace from the following resources:*

US EPA, Business Guide for Reducing Solid Waste, www.epa.gov

US EPA, The Quest for Less, www.epa.gov

Keep America Beautiful, Clean Sweep U.S.A., www.kab.org

New York City Teacher’s RRRResource Guide, www.nyc.gov/sanitation Nike’s Air to Earth Teacher’s Guide, www.airtoearth.com

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