

Kerbside crawl

What's allowed in council recycling bins? Surely that's a simple question. But when Mad World's Lyn Mayes and Steve Long went searching for answers, it wasn't as easy as you would think. **Ruth Le Pla** reports.

An anticipated 'quick and easy' trawl through council websites to help clients, has instead revealed some of the information gaps about our country's recycling sector. Many New Zealand brands, retailers and manufacturers have pledged to use 100 percent reusable, recyclable or compostable packaging in their local operations by 2025 or earlier. Mad World's Lyn Mayes and Steve Long say several clients and companies had asked them about the level of acceptance by council collections for different packaging types around the country.

Councils' websites would spell that out, right? Not so. When Lyn and Steve went checking – and they included a similar number of Australian websites too for good measure – they found several anomalies.

Not surprisingly, recycling systems vary from council to council. That's the nature of local government as each authority strives to provide services tailored to its budget, and community priorities and needs.

The surprise, however, lay in the widely varying levels of information available about those services.

"Some councils have excellent information and guidance on their websites about what is and isn't acceptable and how it should be presented," says Lyn. "However, others do not

provide sufficient information and leave consumers searching for answers."

Lyn and Steve pulled their research into a report, *An Assessment of Materials Collected for Recycling at Kerbside New Zealand & Australia*. Released in August this year, it is based on available website information in July. The report notes that acceptance levels for some products may be higher, but information was not available on council websites to substantiate this.

The report provides a council-by-council breakdown of what can be recycled. Five councils give no information at all, and the Chatham Islands Council is not included as it does not provide a kerbside collection. These six have been excluded from the numbers given below.

The report shares high level results across all major material types including plastics, paper, metals and organics. It also outlines details on the general acceptance criteria, standard rejection issues, and outlines current trends in the recycling industry.

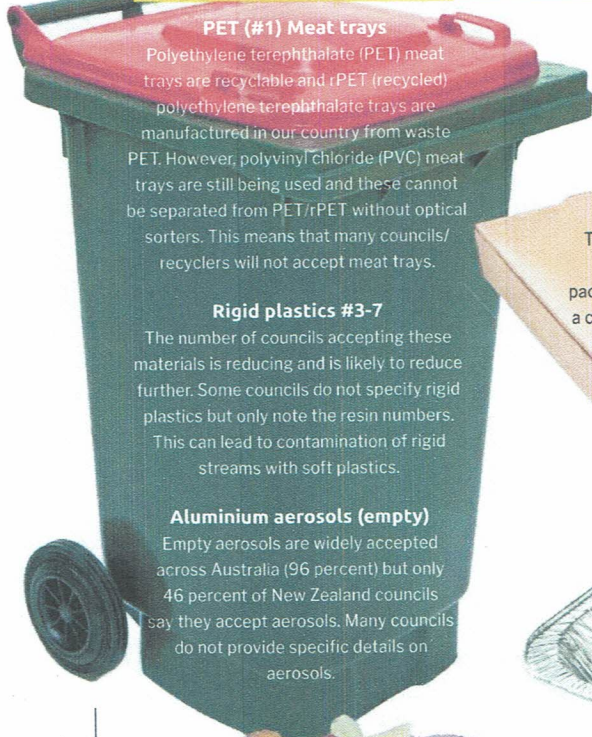
Every Kiwi council surveyed at the time said they would accept plastic bottles (numbers 1 & 2: polyethylene terephthalate [PET] and high-density polyethylene [HDPE]); aluminium and steel cans; and general paper and cardboard.

According to their own websites (at least those that give any indication about recycling at all), 19 out of the 67 Kiwi councils would not accept plastics 3-7. And only five councils – Christchurch, Kaikoura, Selwyn, Timaru and Waimakariri – said they would accept food waste.

Above: Waste material on its way to a better future.

WASTE MANAGEMENT

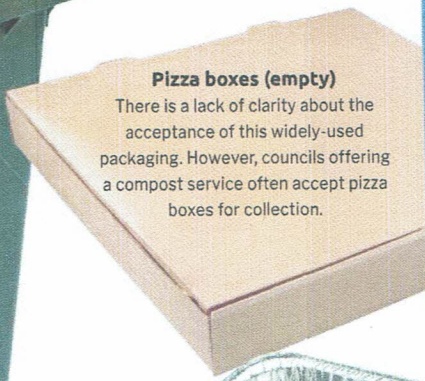
IN THE BIN?



PET (#1) Meat trays
 Polyethylene terephthalate (PET) meat trays are recyclable and rPET (recycled) polyethylene terephthalate trays are manufactured in our country from waste PET. However, polyvinyl chloride (PVC) meat trays are still being used and these cannot be separated from PET/rPET without optical sorters. This means that many councils/recyclers will not accept meat trays.

Rigid plastics #3-7
 The number of councils accepting these materials is reducing and is likely to reduce further. Some councils do not specify rigid plastics but only note the resin numbers. This can lead to contamination of rigid streams with soft plastics.

Aluminium aerosols (empty)
 Empty aerosols are widely accepted across Australia (96 percent) but only 46 percent of New Zealand councils say they accept aerosols. Many councils do not provide specific details on aerosols.



Pizza boxes (empty)
 There is a lack of clarity about the acceptance of this widely-used packaging. However, councils offering a compost service often accept pizza boxes for collection.



Tetra paks (milk/juice)
 Very few New Zealand councils accept tetra paks, compared to the majority of councils in Australia. However, a number of Australian councils are now making a distinction between fresh milk cartons which they do accept (no foil inner) and ultra-high temperature (UHT)/long life milk cartons (with foil liner) that they do not accept.



Aluminium foil trays
 The main reason provided by councils for not accepting foil trays is food contamination. However, other food packaging (food cans, pizza boxes) are accepted if food is removed so foil trays could be collected on same basis. In Australia, consumers are asked to scrunch aluminium foil trays into a large ball, so these are picked up in the sortation process.

Organics collections
 Collection is in its infancy in our country. Schemes that exist usually collect food and garden waste separately. There is a move in Australia towards Food Organic and Garden Organic (FOGO) collection services. Compostable packaging is not collected with any organic kerbside collection service

Key information

- The rule of thumb in our country has been that if over 70 percent of the population has access to a recycling service the packaging can be labelled as "recyclable". In Australia, the Sustainable Packaging Guidelines set the bar at 80 percent.
- In New Zealand, only polyethylene terephthalate (PET) and high-density polyethylene (HDPE) bottles, aluminium and steel cans, glass bottles and paper and cardboard meet the threshold of 70 percent.
- On our side of the Tasman, the range of materials collected at kerbside has reduced and is continuing to dwindle as overseas markets for mixed plastics and mixed fibres have disappeared.
- In Australia, acceptance levels are higher across a range of packaging products.
- There has long been a desire in New Zealand to standardise collections so they are the same nationwide. However, this would likely mean standardising to the lowest range of materials for collection. ■



Confusion over the recyclability of different materials is a major barrier to public participation in recycling.

Lyn says international research shows confusion over the recyclability of different materials is a major barrier to public participation in recycling.

“This is exacerbated by the variations to collection services across New Zealand,” she says, “with differences across council jurisdictions over the types of materials that can be recycled and how packaging should be presented (eg. lids removed, squashed, rinsed etc).”

She also notes that the high level of innovation and increasing introduction of new packaging materials (such as compostables and bioplastics) also means the situation will never be static.

Lyn highlights a number of areas for improvement. “PET meat trays are recyclable; and recyclable (rPET) meat trays are manufactured in New Zealand from waste PET,” she says. “However, the use of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) and polylactic acid (PLA) meat trays is a contaminant for PET and without optical sorters at materials recovery facilities (MRFs), this means in many regions no meat trays can be recycled.”

She says brands need to consider this in their packaging choices. “We also need investment in the MRF so that they are able to separate materials.”

Noting that some high value materials such as aluminium foil aren’t being collected, she says the main reason given is usually “food contamination”.

“However, we accept food tins and ask consumers to wash them out, so foil trays could be collected on the same basis. Overseas there are campaigns to rinse and scrunch aluminium foil so it can be picked up in the sortation process. Investment in our recycling processes will improve materials recovery.” **LG**

The full report is available on bit.ly/Madworld_Kerbside

More worrying, however, is the lack of clarity on many websites around whether certain types of product can be recycled or not. Just 14 council’s websites had enough information to say “yes” or “no” to each question.

Tetra paks (typically used as milk or juice containers) are a good case in point, with the report showing lack of clear direction on 26 council websites. Twenty-five councils did not clarify on their websites whether aerosols could be recycled in their area. The same number of councils (not necessarily the same ones) didn’t explain their acceptance or otherwise of pizza boxes. And 16 councils were not telling consumers whether they could recycle PET meat trays.

HEANEY & PARTNERS
BARRISTERS & SOLICITORS

QUALITY OUTCOMES
For Local & Regional Authorities

Partners: Sarah Macky, Frana Divich, Paul Robertson, Shyrelle Mitchell, Kelly Parker. Consultant: Susan Thodey.
Phone: (09) 3030100. Fax: (09) 3677009. Level 13, PwC Tower, 188 Quay Street, Auckland, 1010. www.heaneypartners.com