

PRESS RELEASE

Recycling starts with sorting: new data, positive trends and remaining challenges in packaging recycling

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The press release from 21 January 2025 was slightly updated on 14 March 2025. The 5.5 million tonnes mentioned at the beginning of the press release refer to the total recovery of packaging waste, not just recycling (which accounts for 5.2 million tonnes). To make this clear, we have added the word 'recovered'.

German dual systems achieved a positive milestone in 2023 by recycling more packaging than in the previous year. This achievement was announced by the German Environment Agency (UBA) and the Zentrale Stelle Verpackungsregister (Central Agency Packaging Register – ZSVR) at a press conference on 21 January 2025. The German waste management sector collected, sorted and recycled large volumes of packaging waste from private households in 2023, in total more than 5.5 million tonnes were recovered. Recovering valuable raw materials allows them to be put back into circulation. The UBA and ZSVR emphasised that strict household waste separation is essential for achieving higher recycling rates.

Statutory recycling quotas have increased significantly since 2018, with dual systems meeting five out of the eight target rates. Some quotas, such as those for ferrous metals, aluminium and paper, paperboard, cardboard (PPC), have even been exceeded. For plastics, there are two separate quotas: one for mechanical recycling and another that includes both recycling and energy recovery.

The share of plastic packaging undergoing mechanical recycling increased from 42.1 percent to 68.9 percent between 2018 and 2023. *“We are delighted with this development”, said Gunda Rachut, Chair of the ZSVR. “The German waste management sector has demonstrated remarkable effort and forward-thinking as it continues to work effectively on the next steps.”* Despite missing the glass packaging recycling quota by 6.9 percentage points due to excessive amounts of used glass ending up in residual waste bins instead of glass containers, and despite the recycling rate for beverage cartons falling 8.7 percentage points short of the quota, progress has been made. Notably, more glass and beverage cartons were recycled in 2023 than in 2022. *“Almost 100 percent of collected glass is recycled into container glass. This makes it all the more tragic that so much glass still ends up in residual waste. We urge all stakeholders – systems, municipalities, retailers and consumers – to give glass packaging a chance to re-enter the economic cycle”,* explained Gunda Rachut.

Another packaging type has the ZSVR worried: composite packaging. Hard to recycle, composite packaging again fell significantly short of its quota. In fact, it lagged an additional 7.9 percentage points further behind the target compared to the previous year. Producer responsibility has not been taken up sufficiently for this packaging type and stakeholders are failing to invest the necessary effort to secure adequate recovery capacities.

The biggest challenges for recycling stem from insufficient sorting and waste separation by consumers. Additionally, systems report a significant decline in collection quality due to sorting errors, with large volumes ending up in the wrong bins. This complicates sorting and recycling, leading to higher costs. It also reduces the volume of properly sorted materials available for high-quality recycling.

Better sorting, better recycling

“Packaging recycling relies on all of us. If consumers don’t consistently separate their waste, packaging cannot be recycled”, said Dr Bettina Rechenberg, Head of Division at the UBA. *“Only when waste ends up in the correct bin at home can the materials it contains be efficiently recovered. This helps save resources and benefits the climate.”*

Germany is on the right track: as of today, recycling packaging from private households saves around 2 million tonnes of CO₂ annually. By 2030, this figure could increase to 2.55 million tonnes, according to a 2022 study by the Öko-Institut. However, research by the UBA has found that yellow bins and bags unfortunately often contain 20 percent to 40 percent residual waste. These sorting errors significantly hinder recycling efforts. At the same time, consumers frequently dispose of easily recyclable packaging in the residual waste bin, causing it to be lost for recycling purposes.

Times have changed and other EU member states now achieve better collection quality than Germany, according to reports from waste management companies to the UBA. *“For a long time, Germans were considered the world champions of waste separation. It’s time we reclaimed that title. There is room for improvement, particularly in the separate collection of used glass”,* explained Dr Bettina Rechenberg. *“But achieving this requires teamwork. I am confident we can make further progress if everyone does their part.”*

Improved waste separation would also benefit the German economy, which relies on recycled raw materials. Starting in 2030, all packaging must be recyclable and new EU regulations will require companies to include a minimum share of secondary raw materials (recyclates) in their packaging. These measures aim to make packaging more environmentally friendly.

Raising awareness about waste separation

Consumers will find useful tips and background knowledge on waste separation at www.mülltrennung-wirkt.de. The UBA recommends a simple rule of thumb: place all used glass packaging into the glass collection, sorted by colour. For unusual colours like red or blue, use the green glass container. Empty packaging made of paper, cardboard or paperboard – like shipping boxes, empty pizza boxes or cookie boxes – should go into the paper collection. Empty packaging that is neither glass nor paper should be placed in the yellow bag or bin. In some regions, it can be disposed of in a recycling bin. It is not necessary to wash packaging before disposal; it just needs to be empty and unstacked.

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