



# Fact Sheet

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## PLASTICS RECYCLING IN THE UNITED STATES

**The plastics recycling industry has shown steady growth and resilience over the years.**

- In recent years, the number of U.S. plastics recycling businesses has nearly tripled. Today, more than 1,800 businesses are involved in recycling post-consumer plastics.
- In 2009, the recycling of plastic bottles reached a record high of nearly 2.5 billion pounds<sup>1</sup>. The pounds of post-consumer plastic bottles collected and recycled in the United States has grown every year since 1990, and bottles remain one of the most widely recycled types of plastics. The recycling rate for plastic bottles has grown to 28 percent.
- A growing number of communities are recycling other types of plastic containers, such as tubs, trays and lids. Currently, about 40 percent of Americans have access to recycle rigid plastic containers in addition to bottles, and that number continues to rise. Nearly 480 million pounds of these materials were recycled in 2009<sup>2</sup>.
- Across the United States, many large grocery and retail chains now invite shoppers to return their used plastic bags and wraps for recycling. In 2009, over 855 million pounds of plastic bags and wraps were recycled in the United States – up 31 percent from 2005<sup>3</sup>. According to EPA data, about 12 percent of plastic bags and wraps were recycled,<sup>4</sup> and with more stores and more communities adopting plastic bag recycling programs, these statistics are continuing to increase. Consumers can now recycle plastic bags at Wal-Mart, Target and Lowe's stores across the country.

**Plastics are a valuable resource – too valuable to waste. They should be recycled.**

- A recent study from Europe shows that, across various market sectors, using plastics instead of alternative materials helps to reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions. In fact, replacing plastics with alternative materials would require the use of 57 percent more energy and produce 61 percent more greenhouse gas emissions (p. 11)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> R. W. Beck, Inc. "2009 National Post-Consumer Plastic Bottle Recycling Report," 2010. See: [http://www.americanchemistry.com/s\\_plastics/sec\\_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11513](http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11513)

<sup>2</sup> Moore Recycling Associates, Inc. "2009 United States National Post-Consumer Report on Non-Bottle Rigid Plastics Recycling," Sonoma, California. 2009. See: [http://www.americanchemistry.com/s\\_plastics/sec\\_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11690](http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11690)

<sup>3</sup> Moore Recycling Associates, Inc. "2009 National Post-Consumer Recycled Plastic Bag and Film Report," Sonoma, California. 2010. See: [http://www.americanchemistry.com/s\\_plastics/sec\\_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11723](http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1593&DID=11723)

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Municipal Waste in the United States: 2009 Facts and Figures* (p. 60, Table 7). See: <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw2009rpt.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Denkstatt GmbH. *The Impact of Plastics on Life Cycle Energy Consumption and Greenhouse Gas Emissions in Europe*. Vienna, Austria. June 2010.



- In the United States, plastics are made primarily (70 percent) from domestic natural gas<sup>6</sup>. By recycling plastics, we make that energy available for new products or for other purposes like heating and cooling our homes. For example, over 4.2 billion pounds of plastics were recycled in the United States in 2009<sup>7</sup>, saving enough energy to heat over 2.1 million homes.

**For more than twenty years, America’s plastics producers have been part of the solution.**

- Plastic manufacturers have a long history of increasing our ability to recycle plastics. Since the early 1990s, America’s plastics and recycling industries have invested over \$2 billion in developing technologies and the infrastructure to recycle plastics in communities across the nation.
- As a result, technologies exist that allow us to recycle every major plastic resin, and over 94 percent of Americans have access to a plastics recycling program, be it curbside collection or a community drop-off center.

**Today, we have a wide variety of modern technologies, growing public awareness, and a desire to implement more recycling programs. To continue to grow plastics recycling, we must increase collection of post-consumer plastics.**

- Despite gains, during most years the demand for recycled plastics exceeds the available supply. Over the last 15 years, generally there have been strong domestic markets to purchase recycled plastics, but the industry has not been able to run at full capacity due to limited quantities of recovered material.
- Through ACC’s Plastics Division, America’s plastics producers are working to increase away-from-home recycling opportunities and to leverage our infrastructure investments in creative new partnerships.
  - In California, ACC has partnered with the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the nonprofit Keep California Beautiful to launch a successful away-from-home recycling program. Through this initiative, ACC has placed nearly 700 new recycling bins on California’s beaches, and we’ve conducted educational advertising to increase recycling awareness among consumers.
  - Recently, ACC launched a pilot program with the California Department of Transportation (CalTrans) to place recycling bins at major highway rest stops throughout California with a focus on areas likely to have a positive impact on preventing marine debris.
  - ACC is working with national grocers and retailers as well as state and local governments to increase at-store programs that collect plastic bags for recycling. We have developed a plastic bag recycling toolkit that is available online at no charge ([www.plasticbagrecycling.org](http://www.plasticbagrecycling.org)). Businesses can access planning tools and signage, and consumers can search for participating stores in their community.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Energy’s and National Renewable Energy Laboratory’s U.S. Life Cycle Inventory Database. See: <http://www.nrel.gov/lci/> Data also available as a report: Franklin Associates, LLC. *Cradle-to-Gate Life Cycle Inventory of Nine Plastic Resins and Two Polyurethane Precursors*. 2007. See: [http://www.americanchemistry.com/s\\_plastics/sec\\_content.asp?CID=1930&DID=7832](http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_content.asp?CID=1930&DID=7832)

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Municipal Waste in the United States: 2009 Facts and Figures* (p. 60, Table 7). See: <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw2009rpt.pdf>



- From a policy perspective, ACC enthusiastically supports initiatives to enhance the recovery of post-consumer plastics through improved access to recycling programs and consumer education; we encourage research designed to make recycling more cost-effective for municipalities across America; and we support the development and implementation of clean technologies to recover the energy value of end-of-life plastics, where recycling is not yet feasible.

For more information, please visit [www.americanchemistry.com/plastics](http://www.americanchemistry.com/plastics)

**Last Updated: May 12, 2011**

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***About the Plastics Division***

*The American Chemistry Council's Plastics Division represents leading companies dedicated to providing innovative solutions to the challenges of today and tomorrow through plastics. Ongoing innovations in plastics have led to medical advances and safety equipment that make our lives better, healthier and safer every day. ACC members are finding innovative ways for plastics to help save energy, reduce green house gas emissions and decrease waste. Since plastics are a valuable resource, too valuable to waste, the Plastics Division is at the forefront of efforts to reduce litter through increased access to recycling, advancements in recycling technology, and public education.*

***About the American Chemistry Council***

*The American Chemistry Council (ACC) represents the leading companies engaged in the business of chemistry. ACC members apply the science of chemistry to make innovative products and services that make people's lives better, healthier and safer. ACC is committed to improved environmental, health and safety performance through Responsible Care®, common sense advocacy designed to address major public policy issues, and health and environmental research and product testing. The business of chemistry is a \$674 billion enterprise and a key element of the nation's economy. It is one of the nation's largest exporters, accounting for ten cents out of every dollar in U.S. exports. Chemistry companies are among the largest investors in research and development. Safety and security have always been primary concerns of ACC members, and they have intensified their efforts, working closely with government agencies to improve security and to defend against any threat to the nation's critical infrastructure. <http://www.americanchemistry.com>*

