

75% of HDPE milk and beverage bottles recycled in 2019

In 2019, over 75% of high-density polyethylene (HDPE) milk and beverage bottles were recycled, injecting a significant amount of material back into the market to be repurposed, according to the Polyolefin Responsibility Organisation (Polyco).



Image source: Gallo/Getty

HDPE plastic is a very common material used in the beverage packaging market and has a very high recycling rate. Over 20,000 tonnes of HDPE enters the market per year of which over 17,000 tonnes gets recycled – making it the plastic with one of the highest recycling rates.

According to Polyco, there are four main reasons why this success has been achieved:

1. The milk bottle has been specifically designed for recycling. It is made from white or clear HDPE, is heavy enough (approximately 40g) to give it sufficient value for waste reclaimers to collect, has an easily removable sleeve label and the cap is made from HDPE as well. Brand owners and retailers have a key role to play when specifying the design of their products.

2. Fresh milk is mainly distributed in the large metros and therefore there will either be separation-at-source programmes in place or the waste reclaimers will actively be separating materials of value either on the kerbside or at the landfill. Due to the

fact that milk does not contaminate the bottle, it is a highly sought-after material as it does not have to be heavily cleaned.

3. The major mechanical recyclers are all based in or close to the major metros and will be looking for clean white or clear HDPE, so they will pay a good price for the product – which again encourages its collection.

4. There is a strong end-use demand for white or clear HDPE recyclate which is used in quality critical products such as body care or detergent bottles. This drives the mechanical recycling demand, which in turn stimulates the collection of the material.



Coca-Cola Beverages SA pilots 2L returnable PET plastic bottles

6 Feb 2020



“HDPE milk bottles are designed perfectly for recyclability and they have a high recycled market value. Driving the right design for recyclability is a key focus area to further grow the recycling economy,” says Mandy Naude, CEO of Polyco.

“Plastic plays a fundamental role in preserving the quality of food products, including dairy,” she says. “As consumers we need to understand that we have the responsibility to ensure that this material’s life-cycle is extended to extract the maximum amount of economic value and to keep it out of landfills. All we have to do is separate the packaging for collection and recycling.”

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