



A Division of The Society of The Plastics Industry, Inc.

Some Common Misperceptions About Vinyl

1) No one is recycling vinyl.

Not true. Of course, industrial scrap vinyl has been recycled for years, but now, post-consumer vinyl recycling is growing, too, with about 5 million pounds of post-consumer vinyl (primarily bottles) currently being recycled. When the Council for Solid Waste Solutions (now, the American Plastics Council) conducted a nationwide survey in 1991, it found that there were an estimated 1,100 municipal recycling programs in place or planned in the United States that include vinyl.

2) There's no market for recycled vinyl.

Not true. In 1989, the University of Toledo identified nearly 100 uses for recycled vinyl. Overall, the potential demand for recycled vinyl is estimated to be about twice the potential supply (494 million pounds needed vs. 207 million pounds available via recycling of bottles). A recent directory published by the Vinyl Institute lists nearly 50 companies that make commercial products out of recycled vinyl.

3) Vinyl is the "problem child" in municipal recycling because it contaminates other resins.

Contamination can occur whether or not vinyl is present. Other resins are just as much a contamination problem for vinyl. Except for commingled (mixed) plastics applications, different plastic materials cannot be mixed successfully in most recycled products applications. This is why it's so important to develop the technology to efficiently separate one plastic from another. Thanks to the chlorine that is present in it, vinyl lends itself very well to automated sorting technology.

4) If vinyl products were banned from the waste stream, there would be no problem sorting plastics.

Not true. The only plastic applications that are currently easily separated are PET soda bottles and HDPE milk bottles. But according to a study conducted by the Massachusetts Executive Office of Environmental Affairs in 1988, programs that limit themselves to these two products can only hope to capture 11 percent of the plastic packaging in the waste stream. To institute a truly comprehensive recycling program, you must include all the other products made from PET and HDPE (which aren't always easily identified), plus the products made from vinyl, LDPE, polystyrene and polypropylene. With or without vinyl, comprehensive plastics separation is a challenging problem.

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- 10) **Vinyl should be banned from incinerators because it contains heavy metal additives.**

This is an evolving issue. Many vinyl products are being reformulated to eliminate the use of heavy metals. Granted, some use of heavy metals is likely to continue, but banning vinyl from incinerators will not eliminate this problem. Rather, regulating agencies (like the EPA) must make sure that all incinerator residues (ash) are disposed of appropriately.

11. **European packagers and grocery stores have banned vinyl.**

Not true. There is only one ban on vinyl packaging in Europe, and that is on the use of vinyl to bottle mineral water in Switzerland — a ban that was orchestrated by the marketers of Swiss mineral water, who used it as a ploy to block the sale of French mineral water in that country. There is a voluntary agreement in Denmark by industry to substitute alternatives to vinyl packaging when feasible and some municipalities in Germany have restricted the use of certain vinyl products in municipally funded building projects. Industry is working to change those restrictions.

Elsewhere in Europe, vinyl packaging continues to be widely used. In Great Britain, one of the leading retailers, Marks & Spencer, has chosen vinyl over other materials as the chain's most "environmentally friendly polymer." In Switzerland, retailer Migros has stated that its whole attitude toward vinyl will change when incinerator scrubber technology is fully employed. The current trend in Europe — led by the Germans — is to take a comprehensive look at waste reduction and make industry a partner in that process. This involves all industries, not just the vinyl industry. Overall, Europe remains a larger consumer of vinyl packaging than the U.S.

- 12) **Vinyl plastics decompose in landfills and give off vinyl chloride monomer.**

Not true. Like all plastics, vinyl is an extremely stable landfill material. It resists chemical attack and degradation, and is so resistant to the conditions present in landfills it is often used to make landfill liners. On those occasions when vinyl chloride monomer is detected in landfills, it typically can be traced to the presence of other chemicals and solvents.

13. **Vinyl products should be banned because they are made from vinyl chloride monomer — a cancer-causing agent that can harm workers and the environment.**

The vinyl industry adheres to very strict standards for the manufacture, use and transportation of vinyl chloride monomer (VCM). These include regulations set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Transportation, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration. Like many other materials used by industry every day, vinyl chloride monomer can be potentially hazardous. Today, however, the use of vinyl chloride monomer presents virtually no hazard to workers or the environment because of the safeguards that have been put in place throughout the manufacturing process.