



## **Used Chemical Drum Recycling**

Every year millions of 55-gallon drums are used to ship and store cleaning chemicals and other products throughout the country. Efficient, economical, and easy to use, the 55-gallon drum is the standard shipping unit for many liquid products. While metal drums were used throughout much of the last century, plastic drums have become increasingly common throughout many industries. A filled drum weighs about 450-500 pounds depending on the material inside and fits neatly with 4 to pallet for storing and stacking. However, the question we often hear from customers is “What do I do with the empty drum?”.

### **Recycle, Landfill, or More Creative Uses**

Once the drum has been emptied of its contents a decision needs to be made on what to do with it. The two main options are to recycle the drums or throw them away. However, many other creative solutions have been observed over the years: drums have been used as trash cans, decorative flower pots, sand and salt containers for parking lots, BBQ grills, and my personal favorite – a basket to throw balls in for an arcade game at a state fair.

While some of these uses are interesting and humorous, they do not really represent a program of how to handle used drums.

### **Landfilling**

Throwing drums away is often an option for many facilities. While it's necessary to check with the waste company whether it can be done or not, in most cases we have seen it is acceptable. Usually, a drum must be triple-rinsed and evidence of such an operation must be recorded prior to being put in a crusher or thrown in a dumpster. It may seem wasteful to throw away a perfectly good drum, but the economics often favor landfilling over recycling (see below). For a facility that uses more than a couple of drums a month, the space they take up in the solid waste stream can start to become significant and other options can be explored.

### **Recycling**

Recycling used drums seems to make a lot of sense. We have been asked many times by customers if they can return a drum and have it refilled with the same product. Unfortunately, recycling drums often runs aground on three issues: transport costs, paperwork, and liability. Shipping empty containers that take up a fair amount of space is expensive. Shipping just a few drums on a price per drum basis is even worse. Thus, many companies decide to “just throw them away”. While not exactly a green attitude, it's tough to fault the short term economic analysis. Using a drum recycling service is difficult unless a number of drums have been accumulated. They are not going to send a truck just to pick up 1-2 drums. Paperwork is

another issue as DOT documentation must accompany all drums being sent back to a manufacturing facility for recycle. This involves someone at the customer site maintaining the paperwork and necessary documents. Finally, there is the issue of liability. If a drum is returned to a manufacturer, refilled, shipped to the customer and then something does not work right it will be almost impossible to trace back what may have happened. And, as a supplier, we can tell you exactly who is going to get blamed. Consequently, most chemical manufacturers are very leery about accepting drums for recycle. With these hurdles it can be understood why some companies decide recycling is not worth the hassle. However, there are some avenues to explore before giving up.

### *Drum Recyclers*

There are drum recycling companies located all over the US. They make their revenues by collecting, prepping, and reselling used drums. Contacting one in your area and asking for help may allow you to evaluate some options you were not previously aware of. Depending on the number of drums and what was in them, the charge to pick up may be negligible. Additionally, such a program usually meets some of the more stringent corporate requirements concerning reduction of waste.

### *Totes*

Totes (275-gallon and 330-gallon) are designed for round trips and refills from the manufacturer. While still requiring the paperwork, it can be much less onerous as totes hold 5 to 6 drums worth of material. Make sure your company is set up to handle totes as opposed to drums as the volume and weight of a tote makes set up more complex. However, for those that can use them, totes can be a good alternative to drums.

There has recently been a spate of legislative initiatives to address the issue of drums and pails in landfills and to encourage recycling of the packaging containers used in industry. It is difficult to gauge where these various proposals will lead and how long it will take for something to happen but it is likely that over the next few years there will be some laws passed that require recycling of the containers. Europe already has many packaging recycle laws and international companies forced to adapt to these are already looking to get ahead of the curve in the U.S.

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