
New survey shows recycling trends in Chicago area

Region recycled 452 pounds per single-family home

August 20, 2026 at 1:27 pm CDT

By Shaw Local News Network

Leaders with the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus, a partnership that includes 275 local governments in a six-county region of Metro Chicago, announced results from a new analysis of recycling activities for single-family households in the Chicago area. On average, 452 pounds of materials were recycled over 12 months.

The MMC commissioned the study as part of Feed the Cart – the largest recycling education and improvement campaign in Illinois' history that launched last October and is funded with a \$2 million grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The campaign aims to increase recycling tonnage across the Chicago metro region by 15% by 2030.

“Every bottle, box, and can we recycle brings us one step closer to a sustainable Chicagoland where both the environment and our communities thrive,” MMC Director of Environmental Initiatives Edith Makra said in a news release. “This analysis from our Feed the Cart campaign will remind everyone how simple and important it is to recycle properly.

“By increasing our recycling tonnage, we not only conserve natural resources but also generate significant economic benefits, supporting thousands of jobs and injecting billions of dollars into our economy.”

The total amount of regional recyclable materials collected in the MMC Region was nearly 500,000 tons, which is the equivalent of filling six Soldier Fields with recyclables, or the Chicagoland Speedway in Joliet to a height of almost 50 feet.

The Feed the Cart recycling campaign in Illinois covers six of the state’s most populous counties: Cook (5 million people), DuPage (900,000), Kane (500,000), Lake (700,000), McHenry (300,000) and Will counties (700,000).

Among SWALCO communities, Lake Forest had a 5% recycling rate, with about 2,600 tons of recyclables in 2024 and 806 pounds per household recycled

Lake Barrington had a 25% recycling rate, with about 800 tons of recyclables in 2024 and 759 pounds per household recycled.

The pre-campaign data collection and summary were conducted by environmental engineering and consulting firm SCS Engineers in Naperville. SCS compiled residential waste and recycling metrics from 2024 from most of the 275 municipalities represented by the Metropolitan Mayors Caucus to generate regional and average recycling rates and tonnage.

It’s the first time such an analysis of recycling quantities has been conducted in this six-county region of Metro Chicago. In collaboration with municipalities and waste haulers, MMC has successfully collected and organized this data to provide vital insights on the current state of recycling in the region. This data serves as the starting point that “Feed the Cart” continues to build on to help increase recycling.

Research from the Feed the Cart analysis of data show:

- The total tonnage of recyclables collected in the Chicago area equals 497,444 tons.
- The six-county MMC region recycled 452 pounds per single-family household in 2024.

The Top 5 most frequently identified contaminants that should not go into recycling bins are:

- Lithium Batteries
- Plastic bags
- Flammable containers (such as aerosol cans that are not fully empty of products like spray paint, hair spray, WD-40 or bug spray, for example, or plastic tubes and containers from heavy-duty glues and epoxy)
- Medical waste
- Clothing and wire clothes hangers because they tangle recycling machinery
- Food/liquid waste

For details on how to properly dispose of these contaminants, visit FeedTheCart.org.

“Chicagoland’s commitment to recycling is shaping a cleaner, more resilient future,” Makra said.

“We know Chicagoland residents want to recycle the right way, and through our Feed the Cart campaign and recycling infrastructure investments, we are providing them with the knowledge and tools to do just that.”