

Focus on: Handling Empty Containers



Containers that held dangerous waste must be managed safely.

Contact information

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ADA Accessibility

To request an ADA accommodation, contact Ecology by phone at 360-407-6700 or email at hwtrpubs@ecy.wa.gov, or visit ecology.wa.gov/accessibility. For Relay Service or TTY call 711 or 877-833-6341.

Containers holding dangerous waste—such as solvents, paints, and pesticides—must be managed as dangerous waste containers until they meet the definition of **empty** in the Dangerous Waste Regulations.¹

This focus sheet explains:

- How to make sure your containers are empty so you aren't required to handle them as dangerous waste.
- How to reuse, recycle, and dispose of your empty containers.

Please note there are specific rules for pharmaceutical containers under [WAC 173-303-555\(8\)](#).² Refer to the [Dangerous Waste Pharmaceuticals Guide](#)³ for more information.

What is an empty container?

A **container** is considered any movable device that stores, transports, treats, disposes, or otherwise handles material. This includes cans, bottles, jars, drums, barrels, bags, liners, inner liners, and large containers mounted on a truck or rail car.

The term **empty** applies⁴ when you remove all contents of a container by using common methods—such as inverting and draining, shaking, scraping, or scooping—**and** the following conditions are met:

- Small containers (119 gallons or less) are empty when **no more** than 1 inch or 3 percent of the container volume remains.
- Large containers (more than 119 gallons) are empty when **no more** than 0.3 percent of the container volume remains.

¹ See the empty containers regulations in WAC 173-303-160(2): <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=173-303-160>.

² <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=173-303-555>.

³ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/2004049.html>.

⁴ See the description of empty containers in WAC 173-303-160(2)(a): <https://app.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=173-303-160>.



Figure 1: Propane tanks are empty when the pressure inside is equal to or nearly equal to atmospheric pressure.



Figure 2: Remove outdated labels from your empty dangerous waste drums.



Figure 3: You may be able to recycle your empty waste drums.



Figure 4: Once aerosol cans are empty, you may be able to recycle them as scrap metal.

- A container that held compressed gas is empty when the pressure inside the container is equal or nearly equal to atmospheric pressure.

Storage

Manage and store containers properly by using the following best management practices:

- Store empty containers in an area protected from the weather.
- Cover containers.
- Tightly secure bungs.
- Remove outdated labels.
- Mark containers as "empty."

We recommend labeling the container with the name of the product last stored in the container and the date it was emptied.

Reuse, recycle, and dispose

To properly manage containers that held acute hazardous waste (AHW) or toxic extremely hazardous waste (WT01 EHW), you must do one of the following.

- Triple rinse the container so it meets the definition of empty before the container is reused, recycled, or disposed of as solid waste.⁵ **Don't** dump product or rinse water on the ground or down the drain.
- Dispose of the container as dangerous waste.

Recycling

If on-site reuse **isn't** an option for you and your larger metal containers are completely empty, you may recycle them through a drum-reconditioning firm or send them to a scrap metal facility. We also recommend recycling empty cans as scrap metal. Check with your metal recycler.

Disposal

[Industrial Materials Exchange \(IMEX\)](#)⁶ often lists exchanges for empty containers. IMEX connects waste generators with waste users. Your local permitted solid waste landfill may also accept empty containers. Contact the landfill first to find out if they will accept the containers and to ask about their requirements.

⁵ See WAC 173-303-160(2)(b): <https://apps.leg.wa.gov/wac/default.aspx?cite=173-303-160>.

⁶ <https://www.hazwastehelp.org/IMEX/index.aspx>.

Find out more

Check with your local fire department or fire district for information about fire codes and requirements that may apply to your containers.

Contact a dangerous waste specialist near you if you have questions about handling empty containers or any other dangerous waste management practices.

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