



# Litter Prevention and Cleanup

## Focus on Modernizing Funding

### The Problem

Washington faces a growing gap between the amount of litter accumulating each year and the funding available to address it. According to the most recent 2022 Washington Statewide Litter Study, an estimated 37.8 million pounds of litter accumulates statewide each year. Available funding from the state’s litter tax only supports removal of about 20% of that total. This funding gap leaves millions of pounds of trash behind, which attracts more littering, impacts tourism and community pride, and causes environmental damage and dangerous road conditions.

Washington’s litter tax was established in 1971 under chapter 82.19 RCW but has not been updated since. The tax applies to 13 product categories commonly found in litter – such as food and beverage packaging and cigarettes.

The 2022 study analyzed how much of Washington’s total litter, measured by pounds and

pieces, is covered by the state’s litter tax. Of the 94 material types found, 26 of them are not covered by the tax. Currently, 47% of total litter by weight and 25% by piece comes from items not covered under the existing litter tax.

Materials covered by the tax tend to be smaller and lighter, while non-taxed items, such as construction and demolition debris and vehicle and tire debris, are larger and heavier. As a result, non-taxed materials account for a greater share of litter when measured by weight rather than by piece. Since disposal costs for collected litter are frequently calculated based on weight, the heavier, non-taxed materials are more expensive to manage.

Each year, 17.9 million pounds and 1,780 million pieces of litter come from items not covered by Washington’s litter tax. Despite this lack of coverage, funds from the tax are used to clean up all types of materials.

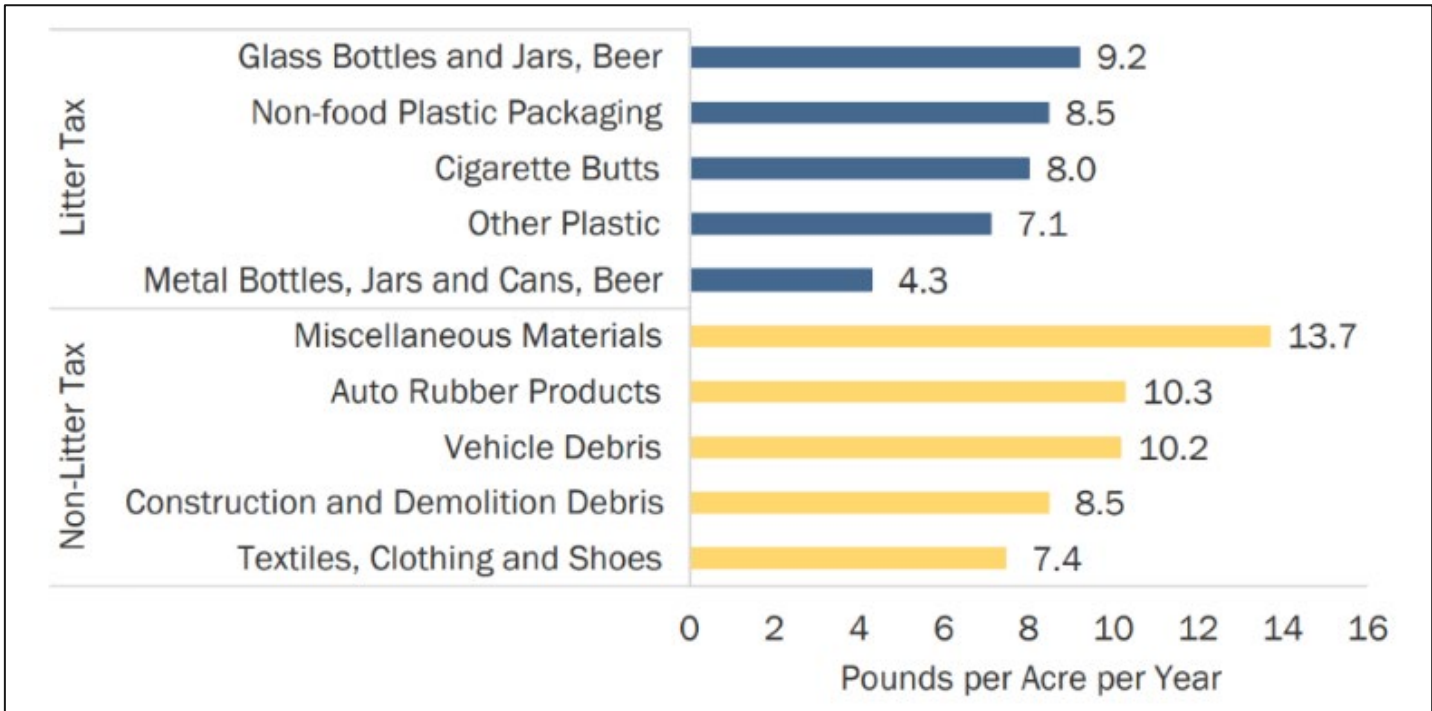


Figure 1 Top five fastest accumulating material types by litter tax class across all study site types combined, by pound

**Construction and demolition debris** is among the top three most littered material types by piece. This debris accumulates at an average rate of 8.5 pounds per acre per year across all litter study site types combined and as high as 309 pounds per mile per year on interstate roadways.

**Vehicle and tire debris** is among the top five fastest accumulating litter types in the state. This debris accumulates at 20.5 pounds per acre per year on average across all site types combined and as high as 543 pounds per mile per year on interstate roadways.

## Why This Matters

The current revenues generated by the litter tax covers the removal of only a fraction of litter accumulating every year. With the current rate of accumulation, the cost to clean up all new litter would be over \$60 million annually.

Currently, the tax generates about \$16-\$18 million annually, which is allocated into the Waste Reduction, Recycling, and Litter Control Account (WRRLLCA). By statute, 40% of WRRLLCA funds have been designated for state litter cleanup and prevention, 20% for local government cleanup and education grants, and 40% for statewide waste reduction and recycling programs.

Modernizing Washington's litter tax would bring in more money for litter prevention and cleanup. Currently, Ecology works with partners across the state to promote litter prevention. This includes campaigns like [We Keep WA Litter Free](#) and [Secure Your Load for Safer Roads](#).

With additional funding, the state could expand cleanup efforts, strengthen public education campaigns, invest in new cleanup technologies, and support regular research to track progress and improve strategies. It would also allow for more resources in underserved communities and help build partnerships to prevent litter long-term.

Because the types of products subject to the litter tax are defined in statute, agency rulemaking alone cannot expand or modernize the tax base. Legislative action is required to ensure businesses whose products contribute significantly to litter help support its cleanup.

## Ecology's Proposal

Ecology proposes updating RCW 82.19.020 to include new categories of litter-prone materials under the state's litter tax. The 2022 study identified construction and demolition debris and vehicle and tire debris as frequently found untaxed materials. In order to address these materials before they become debris, Ecology proposes adding the following materials to the litter tax:

- **Construction products** including but not limited to lumber, roofing materials, insulation, gypsum board, plastic tarps, metal pipes.
- **Motor vehicle products** including but not limited to tires, hubcaps, lights, mirrors, tailpipes, window glass

These additions would reflect the top untaxed litter categories identified in the 2022 study. The existing 0.015% tax rate would remain unchanged. Manufacturers, wholesalers, and distributors of the new materials would be subject to the litter tax beginning January 1, 2028.

In addition, Ecology is considering updating RCW 70A.200.020, which outlines the purpose of the state's litter programs, to remove language stating that its primary purpose is to "provide employment for youth." While this may have aligned with program goals in the 1970s, program operations have evolved significantly. Today, litter pickup requires year-round, flexible staffing strategies, including employment of adults due to changing safety conditions and increased traffic on Washington roadways.

## Related Information

- [2022 Washington Statewide Litter Study](#)
- [2026 Ecology Legislative Priorities](#)



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