



**BEYOND PLASTICS REPORT:  
Tracking Starbucks Deceptive Recyclability Claims**  
— May 20, 2026 —

## Executive Summary

Beyond Plastics conducted a three-month nationwide tracker investigation (January to March 2026) to test Starbucks' claim that its single-use polypropylene (No. 5 plastic) cold-beverage cups are recyclable. **Not a single tracked cup ended up at a recycling facility.**

Beyond Plastics targeted 21 states for this investigation, but trackers were dropped in only 10 of those states (technically nine states, plus Washington, D.C.) because we were unable to find Starbucks stores with recycling options in the areas surveyed for the other 11 states — a story in and of itself, considering the company is [publicly touting](#) the polypropylene plastic cups as “widely recyclable.”

Ultimately, Beyond Plastics placed 53 Bluetooth-enabled trackers inside Starbucks' in-store recycling bins in 35 Starbucks locations across nine states and Washington, D.C. Thirty-six of the 53 trackers provided data, which is typical for tracker investigations. The rest were likely damaged in the trash bin or en route. None of the 36 trackers pinged from an actual recycling facility. Instead, the trackers ended up in landfills, waste-transfer stations, incinerators, or materials recovery facilities (MRFs).

## Key Findings

- Of the 36 trackers that were successfully tracked, moved from the store, and arrived at a final destination:
  - 0 pinged from an actual recycling facility
  - 16 ended up in landfills
  - 9 ended up at incinerator facilities
  - 8 were last detected at waste-transfer stations
    - *Note:* A waste transfer station is a stop on the way to a landfill or incinerator.
  - 3 made it to materials recovery facilities (MRFs)
    - *Note:* Material recovery facilities (MRFs) sort and bale plastics; they are not facilities for actual recycling. A tracker's stop at an MRF does not mean it was recycled.
- Four Starbucks cups crossed state lines, traveling from New York City to a landfill in Amsterdam, Ohio.

- The longest distance traveled by a single Starbucks cup was 463 miles, from 225 4th Avenue in Brooklyn, New York, to a landfill in Amsterdam, Ohio.

**See for yourself!** [Click here to follow the tracked Starbucks' cups via our interactive map.](#)

**View our full data set:** [You can access the data from the tracked Starbucks cups here.](#)

## Why This Matters

On February 2, 2026, Starbucks [published a press release](#) with WM (the country's largest waste hauler, formerly known as Waste Management) and three recycling groups announcing that polypropylene (No. 5 plastic) was now considered “widely recyclable” in the United States — a designation issued by How2Recycle that is not vetted by state or federal regulators. “Recycling your Starbucks cold cups just got easier,” [Starbucks said](#), noting that the designation meant that over 60% of U.S. households can now recycle the company’s cold to-go cups in their curbside recycling bins.

The release [did not clarify](#) that just because people are told they have access to a recycling program for polypropylene does not mean their polypropylene waste will get turned into a new plastic product when placed in their recycling bin. In fact, this cup-tracking investigation found that Starbucks' single-use plastic cups aren't making it to recycling facilities even when they're placed in clearly marked recycling bins at Starbucks locations.

The joint Starbucks and WM announcement in February 2026 followed a November 2025 WM [press release](#) in which the waste hauler announced it was now accepting single-use polypropylene cups in its curbside recycling programs. Starbucks' chief sustainability officer, Marika McCauley Sine, was quoted in the press release saying, “WM's expanded curbside acceptance of our to-go cups is a meaningful step toward a more circular economy — where packaging is recycled more often and more easily.”

The numbers don't back up McCauley Sine's claim. The [U.S. recycling rate](#) for plastics is under 6%, and the bulk of the plastic material making up that number is PET (No. 1 plastic) bottles and HDPE (No. 2 plastic) bottles and jugs.

What's more, polypropylene has very few places to go for recycling in the United States. The exact number of polypropylene recycling facilities nationwide is difficult to determine without publicly available and up-to-date databases. A [December 2025 Greenpeace report](#) identified two commercially operating facilities in the entire country that claim to recycle post-consumer polypropylene: KW Plastics in Troy, Alabama, and St. Joseph Plastics in Saint Joseph, Missouri. An Ultra-Poly recycling facility in Portland, Pennsylvania, claims to recycle polypropylene, and Republic Services Blue Polymers facilities in Indianapolis and Las Vegas claim to recycle post-consumer polypropylene plastic.

PureCycle's Ironton, Ohio, plant claims to recycle polypropylene through so-called "chemical recycling," but Beyond Plastics does not consider chemical recycling to be recycling given that most of the plastic these facilities accept is not actually recycled but turned into fossil fuels or feedstocks using high heat or chemicals. It's a distraction that [has failed for decades](#) and is allowing companies to exponentially increase plastic production while polluting low-income communities and communities of color with hazardous waste and toxic air pollution.

Given the low value of this post-consumer plastic waste — coupled with transportation costs and contamination with other types of plastics, liquids, and food residue at Starbucks — it is unlikely that the used plastic cups collected by waste haulers nationwide are being sent to either of these facilities. In California, polypropylene bales — large, compacted blocks of sorted plastic waste — have an average [contamination rate](#) of 31%, far higher than the 2% contamination rate [accepted by](#) KW Plastics, one of the two facilities in the U.S. that accepts post-consumer polypropylene.

Starbucks is the world's largest coffee chain, serving [millions of customers](#) at more than 40,000 stores worldwide. About 75% of Starbucks' U.S. [beverage sales](#) are cold drinks, most often served in polypropylene (No. 5 plastic) cups, generating an enormous amount of waste.

### Starbucks Locations Where Trackers Were Placed

We were unable to find Starbucks stores with recycling options in the areas surveyed for 11 of the 21 states we targeted for this investigation. The stores Beyond Plastics visited in these 11 states either had no recycling bins at all, or they had specific signage showing that Starbucks' plastic and paper cups are collected for landfill only.



The remaining 10 states displayed in-store signage indicating that the plastic cups could be recycled.



### How the Cups Were Tracked

Small, electronic, Bluetooth-enabled trackers were attached to Starbucks’ single-use polypropylene (No. 5 plastic) cups before they were dropped into recycling bins at Starbucks locations. The data was then plugged into a specialized app so that the cups’ journeys could be tracked over time. Data used to track within the app [can be viewed here](#), and you can follow the tracked cups via [the interactive map here](#).

### Investigation Results

Trackers were placed in stores in nine states plus Washington, D.C. Fifty-three trackers in total were placed, but not all reached a final destination. Of the 17 trackers that did not reach a final destination:

- 10 were most likely damaged or crushed in the store/trash bins and never showed a signal beyond that
- 7 moved from the store, but stopped pinging and did not arrive at a final destination and are currently labeled “in transit.”

#### Final Destination Breakdown

Where did the cups end up?



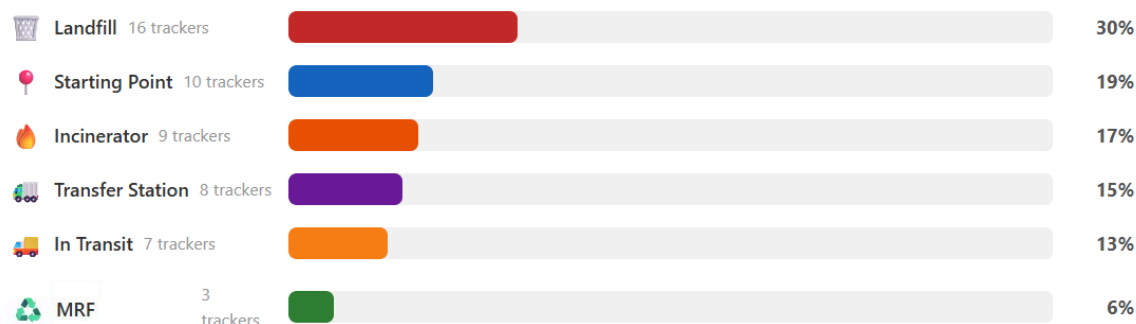
Thirty-six of the 53 trackers provided data, which is very typical for tracker investigations. Of the 36 that were successfully tracked, moved from the store, and arrived at a final destination:

- 0 pinged from an actual recycling facility
- 16 ended up in landfills
- 9 ended up at incinerator facilities
- 8 were last detected at waste-transfer stations
  - *Note:* A waste transfer station is a stop on the way to a landfill or incinerator.
- 3 made it to materials recovery facilities (MRFs)
  - *Note:* Material recovery facilities (MRFs) sort and bale plastics; they are not facilities for actual recycling. A tracker's stop at an MRF does not mean it was recycled.

The image below shows the 36 trackers that pinged from a final destination, after filtering out the 17 trackers that either never left the store or left the store but never pinged from a final destination.

### Final Destination Breakdown

Where did the cups end up?



The tracked Starbucks cups collectively traveled thousands of miles, with the longest distance for a single cup totaling 463 miles. Four Starbucks cups traveled more than 450 miles each in their journey from New York City to a landfill in Amsterdam, Ohio, with one cup making the 463-mile trek from a Starbucks store located at 225 4th Avenue in Brooklyn, New York.

### Recommendations

Rather than continuing to pour money into public-relations efforts to deceive consumers about the recyclability of its cold cups, Starbucks should make the following three changes to actually reduce the amount of single-use plastic waste it adds to the environment each day:

1. Immediately stop deceiving the public about plastics recycling at Starbucks stores by removing the recycling images of plastic (cups) from its in-store bins.
2. Train employees to follow their [“A Better Cup for All”](#) policy by serving ALL customers who order inside their company-owned stores in a reusable ceramic cup or glass, unless

the customer specifically requests a to-go cup. Starbucks says this is their policy but the reusable containers are often not offered.

3. Implement a nationwide switch from plastic to fiber-based to-go cups and lids, just like they have already done in [more than 550 stores across 14 states](#).

## Conclusion

This investigation shows where the vast majority of plastic cups end up — in a landfill or incinerator — illustrating that accepting an item for recycling does not mean it actually gets recycled. And yet Starbucks continues to promote this misleading recycling claim to its customers with public announcements and its custom, in-store recycling signage. For a material to be recycled, it needs to be both technically and economically viable, yet there appear to be only [two commercially operating facilities](#) in the United States, and they have a combined maximum capacity to process 2% of ALL post-consumer, polypropylene plastic waste. Plastic cups are just a small portion of this overall polypropylene waste stream.

In 2020, [Starbucks committed](#) to making 100% of its customer packaging reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2030. It has done very little to meet this goal as nearly all of its 17,000-plus U.S. stores continue to use plastic cups and packaging. Instead, Starbucks has chosen to focus on promoting recyclability of plastic in states where the material is “accepted” but unlikely to be recycled. Regardless of “accepted” or not, this investigation shows Starbucks’ plastic cold cups are likely to end up in a landfill, incinerator, or waste transfer station (a stop on the way to landfill) — not a recycling facility.

Misleading customers about plastic recycling deflects from the real issue: growing plastic production that contributes to the plastic pollution crisis, climate change, and its health harms, especially to [environmental justice communities](#) where production plants, petrochemical facilities, landfills, and incinerators are often sited. The real solution to this massive waste problem is not in recycling plastic, but in companies like Starbucks using less of it, investing in reusable cups and foodware, and incorporating safer, more sustainable packaging when disposable packaging is unavoidable.