

Packaging FAQ

Version 1.0: 2024

Does PCC have a packaging standard?

Yes! PCC's packaging standard aims to inspire our industry partners and producers to seek the most sustainable and least toxic packaging options for their products, while also challenging ourselves to reduce waste and elevate sustainable packaging alternatives. We encourage vendors to minimize their packaging, and to choose materials that are compostable, made from recycled content, reusable, or easy to recycle after use. We have stronger requirements for the packaging used in our deli offerings and our Private Label products. Read our packaging standard [here](#).

Can I bring my own reusable containers for deli or bulks foods?

Yes, with some restrictions, customers can now use clean reusable containers for non-packaged items at PCC. Reusable containers are the best option for reducing environmental impacts of single-use waste. Until recently, however, Washington State food safety rules prohibited retailers from fully supporting reusables.

The good news is that those rules changed in 2022 to allow reusable containers for beverages and non-ready-to-eat foods. PCC was highly involved throughout the long process of updating the food safety code, pushing for changes, encouraging revisions to initial recommendations, and working with staff, suppliers, and regulators to move forward. Read more about this process in the *Sound Consumer* article [PCC Takes Lead in New Reusable Container Rules](#).

Under the approved plan that PCC submitted to the Washington State and local health departments, customers can use clean, reusable containers for gravity bins and liquid dispensers, and any non-ready-to-eat-foods in scoop containers. Customers can also use their own travel mugs or reusable cups at store cafés. Although PCC advocated for even greater reusable allowances, the final rules still do not allow shoppers to use their own containers for spices, herbs, foods at the salad bar, hot bar, or anything that can be scooped and ready to eat without cooking. Additionally, customers cannot use their own containers for staff to fill at the deli counters, but PCC is working on developing a process that meets food handling requirements. For now, we allow shoppers to ask our deli staff to weigh and serve food on one of our compostable paper plates or deli sheets. Then, shoppers can transfer it to their own container.

Does PCC have compostable produce bags?

PCC has conducted in-store trials of compostable produce bags but has faced difficulties finding options that perform well. Until a viable compostable option is found, any plastic produce bags offered must be made from 100% recycled content. We continue to look for new brands of compostable bags and test them in stores; when we find a compostable option that meets shopper expectations, we will replace the plastic ones.

Why does PCC use compostable plastic in the deli?

Because of the impact of petroleum-based plastics on human health and the environment, PCC established a 5-year goal in 2017 to eliminate all petroleum-based packaging from our delis by the end of 2022. The shift to

compostable bioplastics is just one of many packaging improvements we are taking towards achieving this goal. To learn more about this ambitious goal and transformation, read [here](#).

Why am I seeing plastic containers at the deli?

By 2019, PCC achieved nearly 80 percent PLA packaging use in the deli. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, significantly impacted PLA packaging supplies, forcing the use of plastic containers until supplies recover. Despite these challenges, PCC remains committed to its 5-year goal of eliminating petroleum-based plastic at the deli and will make every effort to achieve this goal when packaging supplies stabilize.

What is Polylactic Acid (PLA) plastic?

PLA is a plant-derived polymer, or bioplastic, with similar properties to the petroleum-derived plastics polypropylene and polyethylene. It is commonly made from corn but could also be made from other plant sources like sugar cane. PLA can be used for a wide variety of applications and is becoming a more common alternative in food packaging. PLA can be composted in commercial composting facilities.

Why do your PLA deli containers have the #7 plastic designation on them?

Plastic numbers one through six are specific types of petroleum-based plastics, such as #1 PETE, or polyethylene terephthalate. The #7 plastic designation is a catch-all term for other types of plastics that don't fit under #1-6. PLA is a bioplastic and different from conventional petroleum-based plastics that are labeled #1-6, so it falls under #7 with other miscellaneous plastics.

Is PLA better than petroleum-based plastics?

PCC believes PLA is a better alternative for our uses because it comes from a renewable resource, does not require petroleum as a material feedstock, and can be successfully composted with the infrastructure we have here in the Puget Sound. Composting has a higher environmental value than recycling because it reduces greenhouse gas emissions from organic material in landfills; recyclables can easily be contaminated with food residues and diverted to landfill when containers aren't cleaned well enough, whereas PLA containers can go into curbside compost bins without cleaning. In aerobic commercial composting, microorganisms reportedly convert PLA into water, carbon dioxide and biomass — with no chemical leftovers and no methane emissions.

PLA also doesn't require phthalates in manufacturing like other plastics, which makes it a safer choice for consumers. However, PLA is designed to break down into compost under specific and controlled conditions only found in commercial composting facilities, so there could be potential negative impacts on the environment similar to other plastics if it is not handled and disposed of properly.

Is PLA made from genetically engineered (GE) corn?

The corn used to make the biopolymer in PCC's compostable deli rounds comes from a stream of both non-GMO and GMO corn. PCC searched the marketplace for compostable PLA packaging options that were made of non-GMO corn exclusively, but there are none currently available. Unfortunately, non-GMO polymer is not yet available at the scale needed to supply our stores. The high heat used to create the polymer destroys any genetic material.

Does any compostable deli packaging contain PFAS?

PFAS, or per and poly-fluoroalkyl substances, are chemicals used for their water and oil repellency, and are often found in food packaging, especially in paperboard products like compostable boxes. Unfortunately, they're also incredibly persistent in the environment, earning them the nickname forever chemicals, and they have been linked to numerous health concerns such as weaken immune system function, birth defects, organ damage, and cancer.ⁱ

PCC has been tracking the issue of PFAS for many years and is concerned about its prevalence in food packaging. Our standard established in 2022 prohibits any deli packaging or Private Label product packaging from having intentionally added PFAS. We have been working with suppliers over the past few years to eliminate any molded fiber or compostable products that might have PFAS and replace them with items we know are PFAS-free.

Additionally, a Washington State law that was passed in 2018 and takes effect in 2022 will hopefully help address PFAS in food packaging statewide. As the Department of Ecology can identify safer alternatives, the manufacture, sale, and distribution of food packaging containing PFAS will be prohibited.ⁱⁱ

Why is there so much plastic packaging for produce?

Our produce buyers prioritize produce that can be offered in bulk, without any packaging or pre-set quantities. As outlined in our packaging standard, we also encourage our vendors to eliminate packaging wherever possible. For example, our buyers have frequently asked a potato vendor to sell their spuds in bulk instead of plastic. We also regularly offer items such as Brussel sprouts, citrus, and avocados in loose, bulk forms. Occasionally PCC stores receive items in plastic despite efforts to encourage vendors not to use it. We continue to work with our suppliers and distributors to prevent this from happening and support our vendors to make permanent shifts in their practices that will eliminate or minimize their plastic use. In some instances, however, packing items in a sealed container, for which plastic might be the best option, can extend the food's shelf life and help reduce food waste. PCC tries to balance this with efforts to reduce plastic use in our produce department.

Can I add PCC's PLA compostable deli containers to my backyard compost?

No, the PLA compostable deli containers will not breakdown in your backyard compost pile because they require specific high-heat processes to fully degrade. If you add a PLA container to your home compost pile, it will not break down. The PLA containers should be disposed of via commercial composting, such as Cedar Grove.

Can I put PCC's PLA deli containers in my curbside compost bin?

PCC's compostable containers are Cedar Grove approved, meaning that our PLA can be processed at Cedar Grove's industrial composting facilities and are listed as accepted commercial items. PCC's compostable containers are also accepted by Lenz, the other major compost processor in the region. Some city food and yard waste guides may not list PLA as accepted or refer to Cedar Grove guidelines. Except for in the city of Seattle, Cedar Grove lists their own approved compostable packaging as not accepted in residential yard/compost waste bins. This listing is likely out of fear of customer confusion and the risk of having their compost contaminated with petroleum-based plastics. Because some compostable packaging is very poorly marked, it can be difficult to sort from petroleum-based plastic. To help avoid this confusion and communicate with our customers that our containers are compostable by Cedar Grove and Lenz standards, we have designed our containers with clearly identifiable compostable labels.

Can I recycle PLA containers in the recycling bin?

No, PLA cannot be recycled. While it may look and feel very similar to traditional petroleum-based plastic, it is not the same. PLA containers are bio-based and will contaminate recycling loads. PLA containers are commercially compostable only.

Why do I sometimes see Styrofoam packaging—isn't it banned in Seattle?

Occasionally some items PCC purchases come packaged in #6 Styrofoam, such as pre-packaged mushrooms. Because the packaging is vendor-provided, and the current Seattle Styrofoam ban only applies to service ware and products packaged by the retailer, it is not in violation of the Seattle ban.

PCC strongly encourages our vendors to avoid polystyrene and continues to work with vendors, such as the company that provides mushrooms, to switch their products to more sustainable packaging alternatives, such as molded fiber. That said, our influence only goes so far and changing the food industry's deeply engrained dependency on plastic packaging is a complex undertaking, one that is continually evolving.

This is one of the reasons why we also invest in advocacy beyond our store shelves and vendors and were thrilled when a statewide initiative to ban certain plastic and Styrofoam products (that PCC endorsed) was passed into law in May 2021. (You can read more about the schedule for phased out products [here](#).) The law still provides exemptions for certain pre-packaged food cartons, but the continued pressure these broader bans place on the marketplace to develop better alternatives is an important step towards reducing our society's dependence on these particularly harmful plastics.

ⁱ Laurel A. Schaider et al., "Fluorinated Compounds in U.S. Fast Food Packaging," *Environmental Science & Technology Letters* 4, no. 3 (2017): 105–11, <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.estlett.6b00435>.

ⁱⁱ WA State Department of Ecology, "Focus on: Alternatives to PFAS in Food Packaging" (Hazardous Waste and Toxics Reduction Program, October 2018), <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/documents/1804034.pdf>.