

SB 1256 (Wieckowski): Single-use Propane Cylinders Q&A



Q: How many single-use cylinders are sold each year in North America?

A: Every year in North America, an estimated 40-70 million single-use 1 lb. propane cylinders are sold, with over 10% (4-7 million) in California alone. Because of limited, expensive recycling options, the empty cylinders are often disposed of improperly in landfills, dumpsters, household trash, campsites, along the roadside, or in recycling containers.

Q: What's the problem with single-use cylinders?

A: Single-use cylinders can be dangerous to both personnel and equipment when disposed of improperly in the solid waste stream. When “empty”, single-use cylinders often still contain a small amount of gas, posing a danger to sanitation workers due to the risk of explosions and resulting fires. Also, they are not designed to be safely refilled. Consumers have been critically injured and killed as a result of refilling activities. Because of the dangers involved, the single-use cylinders must be disposed of properly, which can cost millions of dollars annually to local governments.

Q: How often are single-use cylinders recycled?

A: It is estimated that only about 25% of the cylinders sold in California are actually recycled. Therefore, the remaining cylinders are likely being landfilled, which is a waste of perfectly good recyclable metal at one pound of metal per cylinder. The current statewide recycling rate is just over 40%, but has been as high as 51% in the recent past. Recycling of these single-use cylinders continues to underperform as compared to that statewide rate for recycling in general. This is despite the fact that the single-use cylinders are made predominantly of sheet metal that has a fairly decent value on the recyclable materials market.

Q: Are single-use cylinders really the cheapest option for consumers?

A: No! In real terms, this is actually the most expensive option for consumers, but is the most convenient with the lowest cost of entry. This leads consumers to believe that this is the most economical option. The purchase price of single-use cylinders does not take into account the cost for disposal. These disposal costs are externalized to local governments at an average cost of \$3.00 each. Further, single-use cylinders are expensive when you realize that a significant portion of the price you pay is for the packaging and profit! In short, there is only about \$0.40 worth of gas in the cylinder and the cost to make the cylinder is about \$2.00, so you're paying substantially more for the packaging and profit than for the actual gas. The cost paid by the consumer at the point of sale is currently about \$22.00/gallon, while the cost for a refilled 20 lb barbeque tank is about \$6.00/gallon.

Q: Is the cost of disposal cheap for the single-use cylinders?

A: No, actually the disposal cost for single-use cylinders is estimated at \$6,000/ton (\$3.00 each times one-pound per cylinder times 2,000 lbs per ton) versus the current average trash disposal cost of about \$75.00/ton. Those costs are typically borne by local governments and passed down through the curbside rates for trash and recycling service.

Q: What other options are available?

A: California in particular, has a growing infrastructure of refilling and exchange locations for refillable/reusable 1 lb propane cylinders. While this infrastructure continues to grow, the availability of the wasteful single-use cylinders hinders that growth. Of all the propane gas cylinder sizes, only 1 lb propane cylinders are available in single-use. Some consumers will continue to want to refill their own 1 lb cylinders from a 20 lb barbeque tank and should be able to do so safely. While the single-use 1 lb cylinders are not designed to be refilled, the refillable/reusable cylinders are and are designed to be refilled more safely. Currently, there is no responsibility placed on the single-use cylinder manufacturers or distributors for the end-of-life costs of their products, nor is there responsibility for the injury or death caused during refilling activities by consumers.
