

Council Report No. ENG 050-2025

Date: June 10, 2025

File No. 5360-40

To: Mayor and Council
From: Julie Kanya, Solid Waste and Environmental Coordinator
Subject: Curbside Recycling Contamination Remediation Plan Update

RECOMMENDATION

That Council direct staff to proceed with Option 1, as outlined in Appendix B to Report No. ENG 050-2025, to pursue low cost program enhancements for the City of Abbotsford's 2025 Contamination Remediation Program with Recycle BC.

REPORT CONCURRENCE	
GENERAL MANAGER The General Manager concurs with the recommendation of this report.	CITY MANAGER The City Manager concurs with the recommendation of this report.

PURPOSE

To provide an update on the City of Abbotsford (City) progress in the Recycle BC (RBC) Contamination Remediation Plan (CRP), and recommend program enhancements to meet CRP requirements in 2025.

SUMMARY OF THE ISSUE

The City is a member of the Recycle BC (RBC) program where RBC provides incentive fees for the collection of curbside recyclables through a Statement of Work (SOW) agreement. The SOW allows for a maximum accepted recycling contamination rate of 5%.

In 2022 the City's program had a contamination rate of 8.29%. As a result, RBC required the City to develop a Contamination Remediation Plan (CRP) in 2023. Since the initial CRP the City has made modest improvements to the contamination rate; however, further program enhancements are required to meet RBC targets. In 2025 RBC required the City to enter into its third CRP process and began applying financial penalties in the form of Service Level Failure Credits (SLFC). Meeting the target contamination level set out in the CRP and SOW is required to minimize the City's risk of escalating financial penalties and to ensure ongoing participation in the RBC program, which secures viable markets for the commodities. This report summarizes staff recommendations to enhance the City's existing CRP to achieve its target contamination rate in 2025 and meet SOW requirements moving forward.

BACKGROUND

The Recycle BC Program

The City began participation in the RBC program in 2017. RBC is a province-wide extended producer responsibility program where producers fund the collection and recycling of residential packaging and paper products in British Columbia. Under this program, the City provides curbside collection services to residents on behalf of RBC. Participating in the RBC program places the responsibility for selling recyclable commodities on RBC and provides the City with revenue to deliver the collection service. The City's relationship with RBC is outlined in the Master Service Agreement (MSA), and the detailed scope of the curbside service is provided in the Statement of Work (SOW). Participation in the RBC program is governed by specific terms that are uniform across all communities in the program.

The SOW sets out all the terms of participation in the program, including the incentive fees to be paid to the City for curbside collection, which currently amount to approximately \$1.2 million annually, and the potential penalties that a collector may incur. The maximum accepted contamination rate is 5%. Loads exceeding this threshold are subject to annually escalating fines to a maximum of \$120,000 in year one and progressing up to \$480,000 by year four. The maximum cumulative risk for a non-compliant collector is \$1.2 million in four years, as outlined in Attachment A.

Recycle BC Recycling Contamination Remediation Plan

On October 24, 2022, RBC notified staff that the City's curbside collection program had a contamination rate of 8.29%. As a result, the City was required to develop and submit a formal Contamination Remediation Plan (CRP) for the curbside collection, outlining actions and procedures to be implemented to reduce contamination and maintain compliance with the MSA. The CRP is a standardized approach that aims to reduce the contamination rate by 25% below the baseline within nine months of implementation. The contamination baseline includes all "Not Accepted Materials" that are outside of the RBC program such as durable plastic products (e.g. toys, clothes hangers, etc.), mixed garbage, books, scrap metal, textiles/clothing and personal hygiene products. In response the City completed a robust review of its existing education and enforcement program as well as regional best management practices.

To meet RBC's requirements, Council approved significant enhancements to the solid waste program amounting to approximately \$150,000 in additional annual budget. The changes included transitioning from a temporary student staffing model to a permanent team dedicated to the solid waste portfolio, upgrading onboard truck technologies to allow for recycling contamination postcards to be generated automatically, and completing regular waste composition studies. In late 2024 an in-house field audit app was developed to further refine the recycling monitoring program. The City made modest progress towards its goal in 2023 and 2024, reducing contamination from 8.29% to 7.37% over the course of two consecutive CRP processes.

DISCUSSION

2024 CRP Results

In 2024 a total of 42 audits were completed by RBC. Contamination rates ranged from 2.66% to 15.69%. Common contaminants included bagged garbage, books, durable plastic products,

electronics, and scrap metal. In 2024 the contamination decreased from 7.40% to 7.37%, which was short of the target set by RBC to reduce the contamination rate by 25% to 5.55%.

Requirement to Develop a 2025 CRP

The SOW requires a maximum allowable contamination rate of 5%; however, the RBC program average of all collectors was approximately 7% in 2024 and is the threshold that determines whether a municipality is required to develop a CRP in 2025. On February 12, 2025 RBC notified the City of its requirement to enter a third CRP process and advised that the City would be assessed Service Level Failure Credits (SLFC) (i.e. fines) of \$5,000 for audited loads with more than 5.55% contamination, to a maximum of 24 loads in 2025.

The 2024 CRP and City recycling inspections indicate that a relatively small portion of households are contributing most to contamination. Major contributors to contamination can be categorized as either “wish-cyclers” or as households that are misusing the program. “Wish-cycling” is a colloquial term that describes placing unacceptable items in the cart that are believed to be part of the curbside program, when these materials should either be reused, recycled at a depot, or placed in the garbage. Examples of common “wish-cycle” materials are scrap metal, electronics, light bulbs, durable plastic items (toys, garden hoses, Rubbermaid containers, etc.), and batteries. By contrast households who are misusing the program typically use the recycling cart for additional garbage. To reduce the contamination rate, these two user groups are the primary focus of the 2025 CRP.

Benchmarking

Staff completed an in-depth review of recycling programs from 10 municipalities, including seven required to complete a CRP in 2025. The most successful CRPs were similar to Abbotsford’s program and used a combination of permanent staff to monitor recycling contamination, enforcement protocols (i.e. tickets up to \$500 per issue, suspension of recycling service), robust education/outreach programs, and advanced onboard truck technologies to continuously monitor recycling.

Onboard Truck Technology

The City provides curbside recycling collection to approximately 26,600 single-family homes and duplexes, with the collection program divided into the west and east collection areas. Service to approximately 13,400 homes on the west side is provided by City staff, while approximately 13,200 homes on the east side are serviced by a contracted waste hauler.

Onboard truck technology is used to monitor for recycling contamination and automatically issue educational postcards that are mailed to subject properties. The system in the west relies on the drivers watching live video footage while the carts are tipped and recording their observations. The east side uses a more advanced technology with software to identify contamination, eliminating driver/video interface. The software is more proficient in identifying contamination and has generated approximately 75% (almost 10,000) more postcards compared to the west area since 2023. It captures a high-quality image, automatically blurs out irrelevant items, and superimposes a box with a text label to clearly identify unaccepted items on the postcard. In comparison, generic postcards are generated in west Abbotsford and do not include an image.

Next Steps

Enhancements to the CRP program are necessary to meet RBC's requirements. In considering RBC input, regional best management practices and Abbotsford's 2024 CRP results staff developed two options for Council consideration, detailed in Attachment B. Option 1 seeks to enhance the CRP without significant additional financial investment, while Option 2 proposes a new financial investment that upgrades the onboard truck technology in west Abbotsford to align with software used in east Abbotsford. Staff propose the following next steps:

- Implement "Option 1 - Low-Cost Program Enhancements" generally as follows:
 - Maintain existing citywide monitoring, education and enforcement program;
 - Update bylaw to raise fines for contamination to \$500;
 - Develop process to suspend service for ongoing contamination;
 - Survey the community to identify barriers to recycling; and
 - Research and implement new programs to reduce contamination where feasible.
- Reconsider implementation of "Option 2: Enhanced Onboard Truck Technology" upon completion of 2025 CRP.

FINANCIAL PLAN IMPLICATION

The assessment of Service Level Failure Credits could reduce revenue to the City's solid waste program by up to \$120,000 in 2025, or approximately \$5 per household. Escalating SLFCs could reduce the revenue to the City's solid waste program cumulatively by up to \$1.2 million dollars over 4 years. Updating bylaw to raise fines for contamination to \$500 will help to reduce the impact on revenue.

IMPACTS ON COUNCIL POLICIES, STRATEGIC PLAN AND/OR COUNCIL DIRECTION

Recommendations of the report align with Council's Strategic Plan priorities including:

Sustainable and Safe City: Value community's connection with the environment. The CRP supports the City's goals to reduce waste and increase diversion.

Organizational Excellence and Integrity: Ensure City services and programs are efficient and effective, open and transparent governance.

SUBSTANTIATION OF RECOMMENDATION

The City is a member of the RBC program where RBC sets the maximum contamination rate at 5%. The City's pre-existing recycling education program was reviewed and refined as a result of the 2023 requirement from RBC to develop a CRP. Since then the City has made modest progress towards contamination targets through implementation of two consecutive CRPs. The 2025 CRP requires further program refinement to ensure compliance with RBC contractual commitments and reduce risk of financial penalties.

APPROVALS

Nathan Koning, General Manager of Engineering and Regional Utilities
Komal Basatia, Chief Financial Officer
Peter Sparanese, City Manager

ATTACHMENTS

Appendix A - Recycle BC Curbside Statement of Work - Service Level Failure Fines
Appendix B - Summary of CRP Program Enhancement Options