

It's nearly impossible to get rid of a camp stove fuel canister in Maine

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Gas canisters used to fuel camp stoves can be a big challenge to get rid of in Maine once they're empty. They can't just be thrown out. They aren't recyclable. There's no collection programs for them. In short, nobody wants them. As a result, these non-reusable, potentially combustible cans pile up in garages and sheds — or they get dumped in the woods.

“I've seen them in weird spots, like floating in the Kennebec [River],” said John Kirk, an avid fly fisherman from Portland. “There's an island about 5 miles down from the put in, and that's a popular place for people to dump them in the brush.”

Companies that make the canisters, such as Coleman, don't have a collection program for the empties, nor do the stores that sell them, such as L.L.Bean and Cabela's. Many transfer stations and recycling facilities won't accept them, and there is no statewide collection program.

“It’s something we get asked about a lot, and I don’t have a really clear, definitive answer,” said Eric Hamlin, environmental specialist with the Maine Department of Environmental Protection Division of Solid Materials Management. “It’s a problem, and I think the fact that these are hard to get rid of does contribute to people littering.”

Yet the problem isn’t limited to Maine; it’s nationwide. No state has a formal, statewide collection program at this point, though the Connecticut Legislature is currently considering a bill that would require gas cylinder producers to set up a recycling council and establish a statewide gas cylinder stewardship program.

“People are stuck with them — they have four or five at the end of the summer and nobody will take them, then they have them in their garage and they’re like little grenades,” said Darryl Verville, a representative and project manager for Cylinder Recyclers, a company that ships propane canisters from all over the country to be safely processed at its facility in Ohio. “We get hundreds of calls a month from homeowners in the same situation.”

What are your options?

To dispose of single-use propane canisters, people can call their local transfer station or metal recycling center to see if they accept them, Hamlin said. Some do, and some don’t.

Some metal recycling centers, such as AIM Recycling in Bangor, will only accept propane canisters if they have a hole punched in them or they’re cut in half. This proves to the company that the canisters are empty and won’t explode at their facility.

However, this puts the onus on the consumer to puncture the canister — which can be dangerous. In fact, handling instructions on many propane canisters warn against it.

On the back of a 16-ounce Coleman propane canister, for example, the handling directions state: “To discard, contact local refuse hauler or recycling center. Never put in fire or incinerator. Do not puncture.”

On the other hand, MSR, a company that creates small gas canisters that are typically used for backpacking stoves, provides detailed instructions on how to empty and puncture their canisters to prepare them for recycling. MSR suggests using a tool such as a can opener or screwdriver to puncture the canister, but specifically warns against using a saw or any tool that could create a spark.

Just one spark could cause any remaining fuel to ignite.



The great canister stove boil-off lineup features (from front clock-wise) the MSR WindPro, The Snow Peak Giga Power, Jetboil (with pot support ring) and MSR's Pocket Rocket.

Credit: Jeff Strout / BDN

In 2009, the Coleman Co. tried to solve this problem by including a Green Key tool with each propane canister. The tool could be used to open the valve of the canister and lock it open, verifying to recyclers that the canister was empty and depressurized — without the customer having to puncture it.

But the Green Key program wasn't accepted by many recycling agencies across the country, according to Coleman. As a result, the tool was discontinued.

If your community holds a household hazardous waste collection event, then propane canisters may be included in the list of accepted items. But these events are few and far between because of the high expense, said Ryan Kuhl, risk and safety manager for the city of Bangor.

Don't throw propane canisters in the trash or recycling

Propane canisters are considered household hazardous waste, but legally, they can be thrown in the trash if empty, according to Hamlin. Still, many transfer stations don't accept gas canisters, so it's best to call and ask.

“Feedback I have gotten from some of the disposal companies — waste to energy incinerators — is that the cylinders do not create significant problems for them, but they certainly prefer that the gas is used up to the extent possible before the cylinders are discarded,” Hamlin said.

In 2020, a propane canister that was thrown away in someone's household trash exploded in a waste processing plant in Hampden, injuring a worker and forcing the plant to temporarily shut down.

The fact that these canisters can explode when heated or under pressure makes them a big problem for single-sort recycling facilities, too.

“If you get any pressurized gas container like that in a compactor truck, it really is a hazard. It could blow up in the truck,” said Matt Grondin, communications manager at ecomaine, which runs a single-sort recycling facility in southern Maine. “Or, if it makes it through the truck, it certainly can blow up here when we're bailing out material and crunching it all up into our bails.”

Grondin explained that while the metal of the canisters can be recycled, they aren't appropriate for single-stream recycling, a recycling process that doesn't require consumers to do any sorting. Gas canisters should be sorted and labeled at a transfer station so they're handled with the proper care and recycled at a facility that has the equipment to do it safely.

Cylinder Recyclers in Ohio is one of the few companies in the country that specializes in safely recycling pressurized gas cylinders, including propane cylinders, but they don't work directly with households. Instead, they work with entities such as transfer stations and other businesses that can send hundreds or thousands of cylinders at once.

“People call asking to ship them to us,” Verville said. “But just shipping alone from the Northeast is \$400-500 dollars because they can't be shipped UPS or FedEx. They have to be shipped by freight companies by ground.”

At their facility, the company uses special machines to vacuum any remaining propane out of the canisters prior to recycling.

“Even if they're emptied, they're not completely emptied until they're vacuumed at our facility,” Verville said. “We actually heat the facility with the propane we vacuum out of them.”

Are there other solutions?

There are other options than the single use containers though. You could purchase a small refillable gas canister. Flame King creates a 1-pound canister, plus an adapter and special stand so you can refill it from a 20-pound tank. And if you're looking for something larger, Ignik creates a 5-pound tank.

In California, this switch to reusable canisters is being pushed by the California Product Stewardship Council. Their Refuel Your Fun Campaign works with businesses across the country to create locations where people can purchase, refill and exchange reusable 1-pound propane cylinders. Some of these locations are in New England, but none are in Maine.

“There’s no good solution for the homeowner unless their local transfer facility is proactive and sets up something so they can collect them,” Verville said.

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