

A landfill is no place for plastic bottles

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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PET (polyethylene terephthalate), the plastic most commonly used to manufacture bottled water and cold drink packaging, is one of the most versatile plastics on the planet. This might sound like an exaggeration, but consider that all the items in the image below have been made using recycled PET plastic.



For someone without a background in chemical engineering, like myself, this might seem like wizardry, but it all comes down to the fact that PET forms part of the polyester family - a material used in the manufacture of clothing, home textiles, geotextiles, and new product packaging. Herein lies one of the primary reasons why we should limit the number of plastic bottles that end up in our landfills - because their usefulness extends well beyond their original purpose, and to bury them in earth is exceptionally wasteful.

Extended producer responsibility

PETCO is the industry-driven and financed organisation that leads the PET recycling agenda in South Africa. Its formation was made necessary by a changing regulatory environment in the late 20th century that saw a shift of responsibility of environmental and market costs of products, throughout their lifecycles, from the government to the private sector. Supported by a voluntary recycling fee paid annually by its members, PETCO has made admirable headway since its establishment in 2004.

The organisation recently released its 2016 recycling figures which show an increase in its annual PET recycling rate from 52% of post-consumer bottle PET in 2015 to 55% in 2016. The organisation recycled an additional 22% of post-consumer bottles in comparison to the previous year, with the total PET market growing by 14.8% to 241,269-tonnes.

“PETCO is delighted with the latest figures,” says Cheri Scholtz, CEO of PETCO. “Through the remarkable network of people, companies, and organisations we work with, two billion PET bottles were collected for recycling across South Africa during the course of 2016, creating some 62,000 income opportunities for small and micro-collectors, and changing their lives and those of their families in immeasurable ways.”



Cheri Scholtz, CEO of PETCO, explains how the duvet was manufactured from recycled PET.

SA fares comparably well

Since inception, PETCO's efforts have resulted in 800,000-tonnes of carbon and over three million cubic metres of landfill space saved to date. In an age of a pervasive throwaway culture, this is indeed something to celebrate. Compared to a number of other countries, we fare particularly well, says Scholtz. While the US rate of post-consumer PET recycling hovers shockingly around 30%, Europe seems to fare much better.

"In Europe, you've got some absolute winners at 80%, and then you've got others, particularly in Eastern European, who are still building up to their targets, but the average runs around 56-59%. In South Africa, we're actually on 55%, and 95% of it is recycled right here so that makes us, I think, very fortunate," she said. Scholtz notes, however, that much work is being done globally to understand these statistics as the bases differ substantially and a direct comparison cannot be

assumed.



This fleece laptop sleeve was made from five recycled plastic bottles.

The next milestone in PETCO's roadmap is 70% by 2022 and its goal is to make sure it gets there sustainably.

For more info on PETCO, go to www.petco.co.za.

ABOUT SINDY PETERS

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