

Document 2 – Update on the Three-item Garbage Limit and Agriculture Exemption Program

Background

On June 14, 2023, City Council approved [Motion no. 2023-16-06](#) amending the staff recommendation in the *Curbside Waste Diversion Policy Report* ([ACS2023-PWD-SWS-0003](#)). The amendment introduced a firm limit of three garbage items per household for curbside collection every two weeks. This limit applies to both regular garbage and bulky items, as outlined in the [Solid Waste Management By-law \(No. 2024-453\)](#).

At the July 12, 2023, Council meeting, Council approved [Motion no. 2023-18-17](#) to expand the existing Special Considerations Program. This expansion allows for the inclusion of unavoidable home healthcare waste. The motion also directed staff to adapt the administration of the City's Yellow Bag Program—originally designed for small businesses—to provide flexibility for households exceeding the garbage limit. Additionally, it introduced flexible options for agricultural properties with a residence. These properties are permitted to set out unlimited unavoidable farm waste, provided they participate in the City's other curbside waste diversion programs.

In September 2024, the City formally implemented the three-item garbage limit, an action within the Enhanced Education and Enforcement of Source Separation action suite in the Solid Waste Master Plan (SWMP). This policy applies to all 310,000 households receiving curbside collection, including those with waste collected at shared locations (common pads) and those on agricultural properties.

This report presents data collected during the first 12 months of the policy's implementation. It provides an initial benchmark for evaluating the policy's effectiveness, measuring key performance indicators, and assessing resident behavior under the new system. Future reports will continue to track long-term outcomes such as changes in overall waste generation, diversion rates, and compliance levels, supporting a comprehensive evaluation of the policy over time.

Project Updates

The first year of the three-item garbage limit rollout has been successful, with residents largely adapting to the new policy. Key indicators of this positive transition include:

- On average, fewer than 1 per cent of households exceeded the three-item garbage limit during their collection cycles;
- Fewer than 1 per cent of households, on average, received a courtesy tag for setting out oversized garbage containers;
- A measurable reduction in the volume of garbage delivered to the Trail Waste Facility Landfill.

The next section outlines the City's efforts to support the implementation of the new policy, including public communications and engagement, assistance with resident inquiries and complaints, and measures to monitor and manage illegal dumping.

Communications and Public Engagement

Effective communication has been central to the successful implementation and public understanding of the three-item garbage limit and related waste management initiatives. Through coordinated efforts between Solid Waste Services (SWS), Public Information and Media Relations (PIMR), and the Public Outreach and Communications (POC) teams, the City has actively engaged residents across a variety of platforms. These efforts include targeted messaging through social media, the ReCollect app, Waste Explorer, and the City's website, as well as responsive communication strategies to address resident inquiries. In addition, SWS and POC continue to lead public outreach through printed materials and in-person engagement, reinforcing the City's commitment to accessible, informed, and ongoing communication with the community.

Social Media Trends and Feedback Topics

Through POC and PIMR, the City has actively monitored and analyzed public sentiment on social media surrounding the implementation of the three-item garbage limit.

Engagement peaked twice on social media: first between May and June 2024, coinciding with Committee and Council meetings where the new limit was introduced, and again in early September 2024, just before implementation. Interaction levels declined steadily after October 2024, reflecting growing familiarity with the policy. By late 2025, the City is receiving just one to two social media inquiries per month—primarily related to collection issues or bin requirements—compared to 40–50 inquiries per month during peak implementation.

Key Themes from Public Feedback on social media

As part of ongoing sentiment monitoring, the City identified several recurring themes across social media and other feedback channels, particularly during the campaign and post-launch phases:

- Concerns about illegal dumping
- Requests for accommodations for large families and shared households
- Complaints regarding garbage bin size requirements and availability
- Confusion about bin lid requirements (e.g., why green bins can have hinged lids but garbage bins cannot)
- Questions about how the policy applies to common pads and why multi-residential buildings are excluded
- Positive, supportive comments from residents responding to community concerns

Social media performance metrics

City posts about the three-item garbage limit shared across Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) generated the following results:

- 44 posts published
- Approximately 2.3 million impressions (number of times content was displayed to users)
- 3.76 per cent engagement rate, significantly exceeding the City's benchmark of 0.04 per cent – 0.06 per cent
- Positive sentiment outpaced negative by 8 to 1 (34 per cent positive, 4 per cent negative)

311 Service Trends and Common Complaints

The introduction of curbside garbage collection limit changes in fall 2024 has had a continuing significant impact on the operations of the 3-1-1 Contact Centre.

In the months following implementation (October 2024 to April 2025), the Contact Centre experienced a sustained increase in solid waste-related service requests (SRs), averaging approximately 865 SRs per week. This represented a marked rise in volume

compared to previous seasonal norms, indicating heightened public engagement and inquiries related to the new waste collection policies.

The trend continued into the spring and summer of 2025, with SR volumes peaking in April, May, and June, showing year-over-year increases of 68.2 per cent, 41.7 per cent, and 55.9 per cent respectively. While volumes began to stabilize in August and September, the overall SR volume for the April 2025–September 2025 period rose by 23 per cent compared to the same period in 2024.

This surge in ServiceOttawa-generated SRs does not include data related to information requests, which are tracked differently. This would suggest even greater absolute increases to the numbers shared above showing that the waste collection policies had an even greater impact to the 3-1-1 Contact Centre.

Illegal Dumping monitoring and response

As part of the implementation of the three-item garbage limit, the City streamlined the process for reporting illegal dumping through improved online tools and targeted education campaigns. Residents can continue to report illegal dumping via [Ottawa.ca/311](https://ottawa.ca/311) or by calling 3-1-1. In response to reported hotspots, staff have deployed targeted outreach and proactive surveillance in wards and locations where illegal dumping occurs most frequently.

Since the implementation of the three-item garbage limit, illegal dumping has been actively tracked across multiple City services:

- Between October 2024 and August 2025, By-law and Regulatory Services (BLRS) recorded approximately 1,800 instances of illegal household waste dumping, resulting in around 100 Notices of Violation (NOVs) issued.
- Between October 2024 and July 2025, approximately 5,200 cases of illegal dumping in parks and street bins were recorded by Solid Waste, with roughly 100 NOVs issued.
- Roads Services, which began tracking incidents in November 2024, reported 57 instances of illegal dumping up to August 2025, with no NOVs issued during this period.

It is important to note that while there has been an increase in reports and call volumes related to illegal dumping since the policy was introduced, this does not necessarily indicate a rise in actual dumping activity. Increased awareness from public education

campaigns and the availability of new online reporting tools often lead to short-term spikes in reporting.

City staff will continue to support public outreach efforts and enhance engagement in areas where illegal dumping remains a concern. Ongoing education and community collaboration will remain key to raising awareness and ensuring timely, responsive service delivery when illegal dumping is reported.

Courtesy tag and tonnage trends in the first year

Public feedback and interactions have been key indicators of progress during the first year of the three-item garbage limit rollout. In addition to resident engagement, two other important measures—courtesy tagging and garbage tonnage trends—have provided valuable insights into the policy’s impact. This section offers an overview of these trends observed throughout the first year of implementation.

Courtesy tag trends

Courtesy tags are used by Solid Waste Services as a tool to track and educate residents on compliance with curbside waste collection requirements. In the context of the three-item garbage limit, tags issued for excess waste and improper bin sizing serve as key performance indicators.

Since the implementation of the limit, approximately 195,000 courtesy tags have been issued to curbside collection households for various solid waste compliance issues. Of these, approximately 67,500 tags were related to exceeding the three-item waste limit, while around 14,500 addressed the use of bins that did not meet size requirements.

Excess Waste & Oversized Courtesy Tags – results from roll-out Phases

The enforcement of the Three-item Garbage Limit was introduced in three phases, following consultation with internal staff and the Council Sponsor Group, allowing households time to adapt to the new policy. The three phases were:

- *Phase 1 (Tag and take all): September 30, 2024 – October 25, 2024:* residents were educated through courtesy tagging, and all items were taken, including those in excess of the limit.
- *Phase 2 (Tag and leave one item): October 28, 2024 – December 1, 2024:* marked the beginning of enforcement where one item was left behind if the limit was exceeded.

- *Phase 3 (Full implementation): December 2, 2024, onwards:* marked the full implementation of the three-item garbage limit policy, where three items were collected and all excess waste was left behind (unless placed in a City-issued yellow bag).

The table below shows excess waste and oversized bin courtesy tag counts for the first two collection cycles of each phase, for comparative purposes.

Table 1: Excess Waste and Oversized Bin Courtesy Tags (2024)

	Phase 1		Phase 2		Phase 3	
Date Range	Sept 30 - Oct 13	Oct 14 – Oct 27	Oct 28 – Nov 10	Nov 11 – Nov 24	Dec 2 – Dec 15	Dec 16 – Dec 29
Excess waste tags	4,300	1,100	1,800	2,100	2,575	2,125
Oversized bin tags	1,100	575	260	115	30	25

Table 2 shows a notable decrease in the number of courtesy tags issued for oversized bins during the initial weeks of the policy rollout, suggesting improved compliance as residents became more familiar with the new requirements. However, as enforcement measures were gradually strengthened in latter phases, the number of tags increased again, suggesting that residents continued to adapt with each new phase of implementation.

The table also shows a positive trend in the number of oversized bin tags over time. It is important to note, however, that while enforcement for excess waste through non-collection began on December 2, 2024, enforcement for oversized bins did not commence until May 2, 2025. This delay was in accordance with [Motion No. 2024-45-03](#), which provided a six-month transition period to allow residents time to adjust. During this transition phase, courtesy tagging and outreach efforts focused on educating residents about the rationale behind the oversized bin policy and encouraging voluntary compliance.

The table below reflects the longer-term trends associated with tagging in 2025.

Table 2: Trends Associated with Courtesy Tagging

	Quarter 1, 2025	Quarter 2, 2025	Quarter 3, 2025
Excess waste tags	16,300	23,100	13,500
Oversized bin tags	300	5,000	6,800

The increase in excess waste tags during Q2 was likely influenced by seasonal factors such as spring cleaning and student move-out periods. The rise in oversized bin tags during the same period aligns with the start of garbage bin size enforcement on May 2, 2025.

In Q3 2025, a decrease in excess waste tags was observed—a positive trend that will continue to be monitored as the policy enters its second year. However, the number of oversized bin tags remains elevated. This will be closely tracked in the coming months to determine whether ongoing promotion, education, and tagging efforts are effectively supporting resident compliance. If downward trends are not observed, Staff will consider enhancing or adjusting support measures to facilitate further adaptation.

Common Pads

Common pad waste collection refers to a system where multiple households on a single City residential property dispose of their household waste at a shared collection point. These properties typically have one or more designated collection locations for household waste. Across the City, there are roughly 700 common pad locations.

Enforcing the three-item garbage limit with courtesy tags at common pad sites presents challenges, as it is difficult to determine how much waste each individual household is setting out. The City continues to evaluate any issues at these locations on a case-by-case basis to identify whether targeted solutions, such as transitioning to multi-residential collection services, could lead to meaningful improvements.

Beginning in 2026, the City will launch targeted education and outreach initiatives in collaboration with property stakeholders to help residents living at these properties better understand how they can support more sustainable waste management within their communities. Longer-term strategies for common pad collection will be explored and presented as part of the 2027 scheduled review of the three-item garbage limit.

Trends in Curbside Waste Collection Tonnages

The City continues to monitor curbside waste tonnages to assess the impact of the three-item garbage limit. Since the policy took effect in September 2024, curbside garbage tonnages have shown a downward trend, reflecting residents' efforts to reduce waste. The table below presents tonnage data since 2022, highlighting a steady decline. The drop in tonnages from January to August in 2025 compared to the previous year may be partly attributed to compliance with the new garbage limit. It is important to note that other factors, such as reduced consumption patterns influenced by economic conditions, also contribute to changes in waste generation rates.

Table 3: Waste Tonnage Trends

Year	January-August Tonnage <i>(for 2025 reference)</i>	Full Year Tonnage
2022	89,073	132,060
2023	84,815	126,640
2024	83,847	120,779
2025	67,785	-

Additional Options

Several options were introduced to coincide with the launch of the new policy to support resident compliance and provide some flexibility for those needing to set out additional garbage. This section provides an update on the Yellow Bag Program and Special Considerations Program.

Residential Yellow Bag Program

To support the implementation of the three-item garbage limit, the existing Yellow Bag Program for Small Businesses was identified as an option for curbside collection households needing to set out additional garbage. Yellow bags have been made available to residents through a network of participating retailers across the city.

Beginning in October 2024, additional yellow bags were distributed to Home Hardware and Richmond BMR locations. Approximately 24,000 pouches (4 bags per pouch) have been sold to Home Hardware and the Richmond BMR locations to date. Yellow bags

are sold at \$17.60 per pouch, which is revenue neutral to cover the City's costs. Yellow bags are not sold individually and the City does not track how many pouches are sold from retail locations. Retail locations continue to be assessed, with gap areas such as Carp, Constance Bay, Osgoode, and Navan under review for future onboarding.

Sales were also expanded to Client Service Centres (CSC) and select recreation facilities and community centres sites. Sales at these locations are tracked, and approximately 5,000 pouches have been sold.

CSC and recreation facilities and community centres have also provided feedback, indicating that comments from staff and residents have been generally positive, with clients expressing appreciation for having purchase options close to home. Additional feedback included the lack of refund options for unused packages, and inquiries were made about online ordering and bulk purchase options.

Special Considerations Program

The Special Considerations Program (SCP), launched in 2012, supports residents requiring curbside collection of diapers and incontinence products during off-weeks of garbage pickup, addressing concerns about odor and hygiene after the shift to bi-weekly collection. Originally focused on these items, the program now includes dialysis materials, colostomy bags, and other home healthcare waste. Waste collected through the SCP does not count toward a household's annual garbage bag limit, per [Motion No. 2023-18-17](#). Annual registration is required to maintain eligibility.

As of September 2025, 8,120 addresses are enrolled in the SCP, with steady growth especially after the three-item garbage limit implementation:

- 2,918 new users in 2023
- 4,876 new users in 2024
- 2,100 new users in the first half of 2025

Enhanced outreach has driven increased registration, reflecting ongoing demand for specialized waste collection services. The program regularly updates its participant list to remove those who no longer require the service or have not renewed registration.

Collaboration Updates

Since the policy's implementation, several collaborations with other City departments have begun to utilize yellow bags.

Forestry Services: Forestry Services has yellow bags available for the removal of invasive plant species, such as buckthorn and dog-strangling vine, on an as-needed basis. The bags support community-led efforts and contribute to the City's invasive species management through active community involvement.

Cleaning the Capital: In Spring 2025, the Cleaning the Capital program used yellow bags for the first time. SWS supplied 40 boxes—about 4,000 bags—to help differentiate between regular waste, illegal dumping, and waste collected during the program.

Future collaboration with both departments is planned to gather insights and inform ongoing improvements.

Agriculture Exemption Program

Recognizing the unique nature of farm properties and their potential to generate unavoidable farm waste beyond the three-item garbage limit, Council directed staff to implement an exemption for these properties. This exemption permits farm properties with residential homes receiving curbside garbage collection to dispose of additional unavoidable farm waste, including non-recyclable packaging, bale wrap, and feed bags.

During the October 2024 Solid Waste By-law report, staff were also tasked with presenting recommendations on any proposed changes to the Agriculture Exemption Program beyond 2025, as part of the Q4 2025 annual SWMP update.

Input from the agricultural community, combined with data from a year-round agricultural waste set-out study, has informed the recommendations outlined in this report.

Resident Engagement

To engage the residential farming community, the City launched a strategy to gather input from residents across rural wards. A survey was developed to understand waste management practices and needs among registered agricultural households, focusing on unavoidable farm waste, seasonal variations, diversion methods, organic materials, and potential municipal support.

The survey was accessible online via the Solid Waste Master Plan page on Engage Ottawa and promoted through City channels, including eNewsletters and social media. It was also shared by the Ontario Farming Association (OFA), the National Capital Commission, and through door-to-door outreach by Environmental Education Assistants

(EEAs). To ensure accessibility, the Waste Plan Team offered phone and email options for completing the survey.

Through these efforts, 220 of approximately 2,100 registered agricultural residences responded. Over 90 per cent reported routinely generating unavoidable farm waste, primarily plastic items such as twine, bale wrap, grain bags, woven plastic sacks, silage tarps, and cardboard.

Quantities and Seasonal Variation

The volume of unavoidable farm waste reported per property varied widely among survey respondents. On average, however, respondents indicated disposing of four bags and two bins per collection, reflecting the operational demands of active farming. Seasonal fluctuations were also evident, with peak waste generation typically occurring between April and October. Nevertheless, many farmers—particularly those managing livestock—reported producing unavoidable farm waste throughout the entire year.

Participation in Recycling and Organics

92 percent of respondents reported participating in the City's Blue and Black Box programs. In contrast, participation in the Green Bin Program was lower, with only 48 percent actively involved. This reduced participation is partly attributed to on-site composting practices—of the 113 respondents who do not use the green bin, 89 reported managing organic waste through their own composting efforts.

Additional Feedback

Respondents were asked how the City could better support agricultural properties in managing waste. Common themes from the open-ended responses included:

- A strong desire to maintain the agricultural exemption to prevent illegal dumping or burning.
- A lack of awareness about the existence of this exemption.
- A request for the City to explore recycling alternatives for agricultural plastics.

When asked about support for diverting organics and yard waste, 54 percent of respondents indicated they do not require assistance. However, many noted that communities would benefit from targeted outreach efforts, such as information sessions,

door-to-door visits, and workshops, to raise awareness of diversion practices and opportunities.

Set-out Study

The Four-Season Agriculture Set-Out Study was carried out from winter 2024 through summer 2025, involving a sample of approximately 330 properties across all four seasons. Analysis of registered agricultural property data from Revenue Services showed that over 95 percent of residential agricultural properties were concentrated within Wards 5, 19, 20, and 21. To ensure representative coverage, sample sizes were proportionally drawn from these four wards.

City staff visited each selected property, aiming to arrive before the waste collection vehicles. Upon arrival, they conducted visual inspections of the curbside waste set-outs. All waste streams, including agricultural waste, were observed and documented, providing valuable insights into waste generation patterns. The study was conducted over a full two-week collection cycle per season for each property.

Current waste habits

Agriculture Waste: During the study period, unavoidable agricultural waste was observed at up to 12 per cent of the properties visited. Seasonal trends indicated that spring had the highest rate of agricultural waste set-out, with 26 per cent of properties with garbage set outs displaying such waste. The second highest season was summer, with a set-out rate of 22 per cent.

Garbage: The garbage stream set-out rate for residential agricultural properties was observed to be lower than rates previously recorded in urban settings within the City. Across the four seasons, between 35 per cent and 47 per cent of properties visited had garbage set out at the time of inspection.

Several factors identified through the set-out study and door-to-door engagement may explain this lower rate, including but not limited to:

- Waste set-out occurring after inspection times.
- Unoccupied dwellings or absence of residents on the property.
- Storage of waste between collection cycles.
- Use of alternative disposal methods such as private collection, on-site burning, or composting.

These findings highlight the need to consider unique waste generation and disposal behaviors in rural agricultural settings when planning or updating waste collection programs.

Recycling and Organic Waste: Staff also monitored set-out rates for three key diversion streams: Fibre, green bin organics and Glass, Metal, and Plastic (GMP).

Among all diversion streams, GMP consistently showed the highest overall participation rate. Seasonal data revealed that 28 per cent to 37 per cent of all properties visited had GMP materials set out. When considering only properties with any diversion activity, the proportional participation rate for GMP ranged from 68 per cent to 75 per cent across the four seasons.

The fibre stream had a lower overall participation rate, ranging from 12 to 21 percent seasonally. Community engagement revealed that many residents on agricultural properties repurpose fibre materials such as cardboard and paper for burning.

Organics diversion streams—including the Green Bin Program and leaf and yard waste collection—showed the lowest overall participation rates. Across the four seasons, green bin set-out rates ranged from 9 to 14 percent, while leaf and yard waste set-outs remained consistently low, between 1 and 2 percent. Survey responses confirmed that on-site composting is a common practice among agricultural properties.

Recommendation

The set-out study confirmed that the Agriculture Exemption Program is widely and effectively utilized by the agricultural community participating in the City's curbside collection. High recycling participation rates indicate strong engagement with the program among these residents. Additionally, feedback from engagement activities highlighted a strong perceived need for the exemption. Although participation in the Green Bin Program for organics diversion remains low, survey responses suggest this is primarily due to prevalent on-site composting practices. There is an opportunity to improve communication and outreach around the Green Bin Program, particularly to clarify that certain source-separated items accepted in the green bin may not be suitable for on-site composting.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that the Agriculture Exemption Program remain unchanged until 2027. This timing aligns with the upcoming review of the three-item garbage limit and other potential enhanced source separation initiatives. Extending

the exemption to 2027 will allow the City to continue supporting agricultural properties while exploring more comprehensive, long-term waste management solutions.

During this period, staff will focus on developing sustainable strategies for managing unavoidable farm waste, which may include:

- Conducting a market viability study for agricultural plastics and other materials.
- Undertaking further research to accurately quantify unavoidable waste generation and analyze associated collection costs.
- Exploring collaboration and partnership opportunities with public and private sector stakeholders to promote reuse, reduction, and recycling.
- Piloting or implementing diversion strategies where feasible before 2027 to build momentum and gather early insights.

Conclusion and Next Steps

The three-item garbage limit, introduced in September 2024, has benefited from extensive promotion and outreach, contributing to its successful first year. Supporting initiatives like the Special Considerations Program, Agriculture Exemption Program, and yellow bag sales have further facilitated compliance. A decline in curbside garbage tonnages suggests residents are reducing waste, and staff have provided individual assistance to encourage compliance and use of recycling and the Green Bin Program.

Next steps include targeted outreach to support areas, demographics, and property types needing additional assistance, including households with common pad collection. In addition, a Behaviour Change Management Strategy will be developed to promote compliance and foster a community-wide shift toward waste reduction aligned with the waste management hierarchy.

Staff recommend maintaining the Agriculture Exemption Program unchanged until 2027. If extended, recycling end-market options for unavoidable farm waste will be explored.

In 2027, a comprehensive update on the three-item garbage limit and related initiatives will be presented, leveraging data on waste trends and compliance to evaluate the policy's effectiveness. Additional curbside collection separation solutions may also be proposed as part of this review.