

Your leftover paints are turning into bright recycling success

by Eric Mortenson, The Oregonian
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Abby Metty/The Oregonian

Technician Rodney Haney carries cans of leftover paint to color-coded sinks in the colorful but madcap start of Metro's paint recycling process. Workers blend latex paints to produce and sell 15 standard colors.

The scene at Metro's paint sorting room is what it must have been like inside artist Jackson Pollock's head.

Four men, dressed in rubber boots, gloves, aprons, overalls and head coverings, slosh paint like crazed kindergartners. Working at fast-forward speed, they grab cans of half-used paint, pop the tops, stir the contents, slide the cans across a splattered work table and dump them into one of 14 color-coded sinks. Pick the closest match, and pour.

The room's walls, floor, windows, door handle and even the handrail of the stairs leading to it are glopped up with what used to be the colors of the rainbow. It's a glorious mess, made possible by your deciding to finally get rid of all those half-empty cans in the garage.

More importantly, it's the hinge point of a recycling effort that is blossoming from nice idea to national trendsetter.

METROPAINT -- BY THE NUMBERS

- 40 -- Percentage of Portland-area's hazardous household waste that is paint.
- 200,000 -- Gallons of paint recycled annually by area residents.
- 10 -- Years that Metro has been mixing and selling recycled paint.
- 900,000 -- Gallons of MetroPaint sold during that time.

- 15 -- Number of standard colors produced at Metro's Swan Island plant.
- \$6 to \$10 -- Price per gallon for MetroPaint.

Source: Metro

[Metro](#), the regional government, has been taking in leftover paint as part of its hazardous waste collection program since 1992. It's a huge part of the waste stream -- paint makes up 40 percent of the region's hazardous household waste -- which led to Metro beginning to remix and sell latex paint in 1999. Since then, Metro has sold more than 900,000 gallons, and its brand, [MetroPaint](#), now accounts for an estimated 4 percent of sales in the Portland market.

There are only a handful of such operations nationally, but it's been fairly low-key until this summer, when parallel developments brushed it with a glimmering topcoat.

First, the Oregon Legislature passed the nation's first "paint product stewardship" law, setting up a system to collect and recycle or safely dispose of leftover paint. The program, beginning in 2010, will be funded by a fee passed on at the retail end, probably less than 50 cents per container. The law was endorsed by the state [Department of Environmental Quality](#) and by an industry group called the [National Paint and Coatings Association](#), with help from Metro.

The law is expected to make more paint available for recycling statewide. Details are yet to be worked out, but it's likely that stores will become collection centers for paint their customers don't use, or that other community collection points will be established. Metro, which collects paint, solvents, cleaners and other household waste at its transfer stations and during targeted neighborhood roundups, operates the state's largest collection program.

"We lobbied for (the legislation)," said Jim Quinn, Metro's hazardous waste program manager. "My main role was to say, 'Hey, recycling can work. We're the proof.'"

Then, in July, Metro announced an agreement with Portland's signature paint company, [Miller Paint](#), to sell MetroPaint at Miller's 20 Portland stores and eventually expanding to all 33 stores in Oregon and Washington.

Steve Dearborn, Miller Paint's president and CEO, said the paint is proving popular with customers concerned about recycling and cost. Recycled paint ranges in price from \$6 to \$10 per gallon.

Dearborn believes the retail arrangement "can easily double or triple" what Metro has sold in the past.

"We'll sell what they can make," he said
Like any recycling program, MetroPaint begins with, and circles back to, you.

Let's say you painted your daughter's bedroom a couple years ago. A lovely sea green, or whatever. The job didn't take the full gallon you

bought, so you stored the can in the shed or garage and it's been sitting there ever since, along with the remnants from other painting projects.

Your half-empty cans are part of a huge national story. An estimated 10 percent of 750 million gallons of architectural paint sold in the U.S. each year doesn't get used, according to the [Product Stewardship Institute](#). Leftover paint is by far the largest single component of hazardous household waste, making up 40 to 60 percent of the waste stream nationally, by one estimate.

You and your neighbors deliver about 200,000 gallons of old paint a year to Metro, with thousands of collected cans arriving at the agency's Swan Island plant. Oil-based paints are sorted out at the receiving end; they can't be recycled and instead are shipped to such destinations as cement kilns, which burn it for fuel.

About 25 percent of the remaining latex paint is moldy, contaminated or dried up and can't be re-used. It is mixed with solidifying agents and trucked to a landfill. The rest goes to the madcap paint sorting room, where the fun begins.

The 14 sorting sinks drain into 300-gallon batch tanks. Shades of greens, browns, blues, reds and other colors join forces to create MetroPaint's 15 standard colors, which range from Barn Red and Mountain Snow white to a dark blue Crater Lake, Forest green, Carnation pink and a dark brown Espresso.

The paint is pumped through three progressively finer filters, the last being a 300-micron filter capable of screening out grains of sand. The paint is sold in one-gallon and five-gallon cans.

Lab technicians continually test the paint's viscosity and durability, checking to see how easily it applies, how well it covers existing paint and how it holds up to wear. MetroPaint was certified in 2007 by Green Seal and Master Painters Institute, meaning it passed environmental and performance tests.

Whether it's as good as new paint is a subjective matter. It comes with a limited warranty, and Metro officials believe it's as good or better than any mid-range paint. They acknowledge that some contractors are skeptical; others are repeat customers.

The persistent question about batches of recycled paint, however, is color consistency. When you're mixing from so many varied sources, matching color from batch to batch is an art form of its own. But MetroPaint Program Manager Andrew Staab said batches are matched against a standard color chart and adjusted accordingly.

"We only will sell it if it's a virtually a dead-on mix," Staab said.

Batches that don't match are given away to organizations such as Mercy Corps, which has used MetroPaint in aid programs conducted in Eastern Europe and Africa.

"The batch to batch consistency is pretty amazing," said Dearborn, Miller Paint's CEO. "They may not have the color accuracy we would strive for and deliver, but in certain applications it's very good."

Dearborn said customers report using MetroPaint on sheds and garages in addition to interior rooms. It's especially popular with property managers who must frequently repaint rentals, he said. Because the recycled paint derives from both interior and exterior paints, it can be used in either application, or used as a primer for a top coat of new paint.

Dearborn doesn't believe recycled paint will cannibalize sales from Miller's own line. Quinn, Metro's hazardous waste manager, said about 25 percent of the paint collected for recycling is from Miller anyway -- an indication of the company's hold on the local market.

"We told them that as a selling point" in winning the company's approval to sell MetroPaint in its stores, Quinn said.

"It's the right product at the right time," he said.

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