

Holiday Alert: Polyvinyl Chloride Gift Cards Are On The Naughty List



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Gift cards are a convenient and popular giving choice. Roughly \$173 billion dollars' worth of gift cards (a total of around 3.4 billion cards) were sold in the United States in 2021.¹ As the 2022 holiday season begins, experts say that “gift cards are expected to be popular presents as 60% of consumers say they will buy the cards to fill a void in product availability created by disruptions to product supply chains.”²

Unfortunately, **many big brand companies are choosing to use polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic to make their gift cards.** Major retailers offer dozens of PVC gift cards for sale in their stores and informal surveys indicate that as much as 70% of the gift cards sold in stores are made from PVC plastic.



This gift card display at a Target includes both plastic and paper gift cards. An informal survey found that 70%+ were likely made from PVC.

This is unfortunate as PVC is a toxic material from start to finish.³ Consider the following facts:

- **PVC is poisonous to produce.** Vinyl chloride, the building block of PVC, is defined by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a human carcinogen.⁴ Creating PVC requires the use of cancer-causing chemicals with a history of sickening workers and causing fires with harmful impacts to residents in nearby communities.^{5,6,7}
- **PVC waste is hazardous to dispose of.** The EPA is currently considering classifying PVC waste as hazardous waste.⁸
- **PVC gift cards are not accepted by curbside and household recycling programs.**⁹ PVC products in general are not recyclable, as shown by the EPA who reported that the total amount of PVC recycled in 2018 was “negligible.”¹⁰ If consumers mistakenly put their PVC gift cards in a recycling bin, most of the cards will likely end up buried in a landfill or burned in an incinerator. Additionally, some PVC gift cards put in recycle bins may be exported to developing countries in mixed plastic waste bales or as contamination in paper bales where they will cause pollution.
- **Significant amounts of PVC waste are created from manufacturing gift cards.** The cards are punched out from sheets of PVC plastic, leaving as much as half of the material behind as waste. It appears that some PVC gift card manufacturing waste may also be exported to developing countries.



Baled PVC plastic waste left over from manufacturing cards.

- **U.S. PVC waste exports are violating the laws of countries that ban PVC imports**, such as Malaysia, India, Turkey, and Mexico.¹¹ As noted above, the U.S. recycling rate for PVC is “negligible”. In 2021, the U.S. exported 23.6 million kg of PVC waste (about 4,450 shipping containers/year).¹² PVC cards themselves may have also be exported as part of “mixed plastic waste” and as contamination in paper bales. PVC gift cards from U.S. mixed plastic waste exports have been found dumped and burned in Turkey.^{13,14}



This Walmart gift card was found dumped in Turkey. Infrared testing confirmed that it's made of PVC. Turkey is one of the many countries that have banned imports of PVC plastic waste.

- Plastic gift cards from contaminated paper bales that hail from other countries have also been found polluting riverbanks near pulp mills in East Java, Indonesia.¹⁵
- These **PVC waste exports are threatening the health of communities in the receiving countries**. Dioxin from the burning of PVC plastic waste exports has been proven to enter the food supply in countries that receive this waste.¹⁶



Photos of some of the plastic gift cards found polluting riverbanks near pulp mills in East Java, Indonesia that come from contaminated waste paper exports.

The good news is that safe, non-toxic, more sustainable alternatives to PVC gift cards are readily available now.

Brands can choose to create and sell either:

- 1. Electronic Gift Cards.** These digital gift cards are purchased and used online and through mobile apps. Electronic gift cards offer all the same convenience as plastic or paper with none of the waste.¹⁷
- 2. Paper Gift Cards.** Paper gift cards are non-toxic and can be made from renewable resources.¹⁸ These gift cards can include magnetic stripes just like a PVC plastic card does. The magnetic strips can be removed during the de-inking phase of the mechanical recycling process, so their inclusion does not impact the recyclability of paper gift cards. Many major corporations already use paper for their gift cards including Amazon, Starbucks, and Apple.



A sampling of the paper gift cards for sale at a major retailer in the fall of 2022.

There is no excuse for corporations to continue selling PVC gift cards when safer, more sustainable alternatives are available.

We call on all companies to commit to stop selling all PVC gift cards and switch to paper or electronic gift cards immediately.

Please visit <http://www.beyondplastics.org/pvcgiftcards> to join us in urging companies to make this switch.

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