

Recycled content / LEED statement

Steel is the most recycled material in the world and recycled steel is used in the manufacture of all new steel. So it is natural to ask the question “What is the recycled content of my steel?” on the assumption that steel with a higher proportion of recycled content might be more ‘sustainable’. But for steel this may not be true. The concept of recycled content is a useful metric to stimulate economies of scale around recycling of materials which may otherwise be incinerated or land-filled. But this is not the case for steel. Steel has been recycled for over 150 years and the recycling process and infrastructure is efficient and economical without any added stimulus. Scrap steel is valuable, so wherever it can be recovered, it is and very little steel ever becomes waste. So, buying steel on the basis of high recycled content does not stimulate further recycling, but may actually stimulate the market to redirect feedstock away from products or markets where recycling is most economical – potentially reducing efficiencies and increasing costs and international transportation of steel.

This view is shared across the metals industry and also by and also by institutions. Rather than attempting to increase the recycled content of steel, the way to make steel-based products more sustainable is to ensure that, at the end of their useful lives, the steel can be easily recovered to ensure continued, economic recycling. Despite recycled content being an inappropriate measure of the sustainability of steel, certain schemes which cover multi-materials (e.g. LEED certification of buildings) require information on this metric. In such cases, and to prevent inefficiencies, it is best to take a holistic view of recycled content. In the European steel industry as a whole, recycled scrap steel accounts for 56% of total steel making, being made up of 32% pre-consumer and 24% post-consumer scrap (See LEED fact sheet on www.eurofer.org → News&Media → Publications). For purchases of European steel, we recommend using a recycled content figure of 56% which reflects the total industry position and prevents uneconomic distortions of the market. Only by using the approach presented above, and by designing steel-based products to ensure efficient recovery of steel at end-of-life, will the steel recycling infrastructure remain highly efficient – ensuring that steel continues to be economically recycled and that costs to end-users of steel are kept as low as possible.

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