

Understanding Recycled Gold According to ISO 21261-3:2024 (DIS)

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The classification, sourcing, and refinement of recycled gold have become critical topics in the jewellery and precious metals industry. The introduction of ISO 21261-3:2024 establishes a robust framework that sets rigorous legal, technical, and ethical standards for defining and handling recycled gold. This article provides a comprehensive analysis of this standard, reflecting the legally binding criteria and is intended to serve as a reliable reference for professionals and institutions.



1. Definition of Recycled Gold

Recycled gold, as defined in ISO 21261-3:2024, refers to gold that has been sourced or refined exclusively from 100% eligible recycled sources. These sources include:

- **Pre-consumer recycled gold:** Generated during manufacturing processes.
- **Post-consumer recycled gold:** Sourced from end-users or discarded products.
- **Waste-recycled gold:** Derived from low-gold-content materials typically generated by industrial sectors.

This definition explicitly excludes investment gold products unless they are produced exclusively from eligible recycled sources.

2. Eligibility Criteria for Recycled Gold Sources

The eligibility of gold sources is essential to maintaining traceability and compliance. ISO 21261-3:2024 outlines specific requirements for three categories of recycled gold:

2.1 Pre-consumer Recycled Gold (Clauses 3.2, 5.1)

- **Definition:** Gold derived from materials generated during manufacturing, such as production scraps, casting scraps, and solutions no longer required for their original purpose.
- **Eligibility Criteria:**
- Materials must be refined into fine gold by an independent organisation.
- Organisations cannot classify their own scraps as pre-consumer recycled gold unless:
 - All starting materials used were already pre-consumer recycled gold.
 - The materials were segregated to prevent contamination with other gold typologies.

2.2 Post-consumer Recycled Gold (Clauses 3.3, 5.2)

- **Definition:** Gold sourced from individuals, organisations, or industrial facilities as end-users of gold-containing products. Examples include discarded jewellery, dental scrap, and electronic components.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** Investment gold (e.g., bars or coins) qualifies only if:
 - It was exclusively produced from post-consumer recycled gold.
 - Refinement was conducted in a segregated manner to ensure purity and traceability.

2.3 Waste-recycled Gold (Clauses 3.9, 5.4)

- **Definition:** Gold obtained from low-gold-content materials, often generated by the electronics or decorative industries.
- **Eligibility Criteria:** Source materials must qualify as recycled gold sources, falling under either pre-consumer or post-consumer definitions.
- Materials can be pre-treated or pre-refined by third-party organisations, provided they are handled with strict segregation to maintain purity and traceability.
- Materials not meeting these criteria cannot qualify, even if they originate from low-grade sources.



3. Refinement and Segregation Requirements (Clause 1, 6)

The refining process plays a pivotal role in maintaining the classification of recycled gold. ISO 21261-3:2024 mandates that:

- Refining must be performed in a manner that ensures segregation from other gold typologies, such as mined gold or investment gold.
- If recycled gold is mixed with other typologies during refinement, the resulting material must be classified as "mixed gold," not recycled gold.

Segregation ensures the integrity and traceability of recycled gold throughout the supply chain.

4. Terminology and Prohibited Practices (Clause 4.3)

To prevent misleading representations, ISO 21261-3:2024 imposes strict terminology rules:

- Products containing 100% recycled gold can be referred to as:
 - Recycled gold
 - Made of recycled gold
 - Recycled gold alloy
 - X-karat recycled gold
- Indicating fractional recycled content (e.g., "80% recycled material") is prohibited. For mixed gold, the proportion of each typology (e.g., "80% mined gold and 20% recycled gold") must be explicitly stated.
- Claims of compliance with recycled gold definitions rely exclusively on documented traceability, as analytical methods cannot verify recycled content.

5. Flows of Gold Typologies (Annex A)

Annex A of ISO 21261-3:2024 illustrates three key flows of gold typologies:

5.1 Segregated Flows

Gold typologies, such as pre-consumer, post-consumer, and waste-recycled gold, must be kept segregated throughout the supply chain to preserve their classification. This includes internal handling and returns from manufacturers or customers.

5.2 Mixed Flows

When different typologies are combined, the resulting material is classified as "mixed gold." For example, blending mined gold with recycled gold results in a mixed gold typology.

5.3 Recycling Flows

Pre-consumer and post-consumer recycled gold sources can be combined into a single recycled gold source, provided they meet the standard's eligibility and segregation criteria.

6. Key Elements (Clauses 1, 4.3, 6)

- Only organisations certified under ISO 21261-1 and ISO 21261-2 may use the term "recycled gold."
- Analytical methods cannot verify recycled content; compliance relies exclusively on documented traceability.

7. Legal and Ethical Implications

ISO 21261-3:2024 is not merely a technical standard; it is also a benchmark for legal and ethical compliance in the gold industry. By adhering to these guidelines, organisations can:

- Ensure their products meet international standards for responsible sourcing.
- Demonstrate commitment to sustainability and ethical practices.
- Avoid legal risks associated with misrepresentation of recycled gold content.

Conclusion

ISO 21261-3:2024 provides a robust framework for defining and handling recycled gold, ensuring traceability, integrity, and ethical sourcing across the supply chain. By adhering to these standards, organisations contribute to a more sustainable and transparent gold industry while meeting the expectations of regulators, consumers, and other stakeholders.

For detailed technical guidance, readers are encouraged to consult the full text of the ISO 21261-3:2024 document.

