

Worldwide crisis in recycling markets hits Broward | Opinion



Shiraz Kashar with Waste Management's Community Outreach and Education shines a spotlight on a large mattress in the pile of recycle materials that's not meant to be recycled, at the Reuter Recycling Facility in Pembroke Pines (Tamy Alvarez / Sun Sentinel)

By Mayors Mike Ryan and Daniel Stermer

MAY 7, 2018, 12:30 PM

From parks to schools and from driveways to offices, we search for the recyclable bin. We are constantly reminded of the dangers of plastics in our oceans and environment. We are excited when we see innovative uses for recycled materials. Yet, municipalities in Broward County are facing a crisis that will increase costs, potentially divert recyclable materials to landfills instead of more sustainable disposal options, and depress recycling outcomes for decades to come.

Recyclable materials actually represent a group of individual "commodities," including glass, metals, paper, cardboard and plastics. To move these commodities from our kitchens to re-use, we have traditionally relied upon the profit-motivated private sector. To create the supply and meet our obligations as sustainability stewards, we set a state-wide target of 75 percent diversion of recyclables from the waste stream headed to disposal.

But, because municipalities lack local government control of solid waste infrastructure and we have been unable to utilize collective buying power to secure strategic, long-term contracts with the private sector to supplement our regional system, we are subject to volatility. Now, the slow burning worldwide crisis has erupted.

In recent years, the national and international markets for processing certain recyclable commodities have collapsed. A number of factors have contributed to this situation. Key foreign markets have reduced their absorption of recyclable materials; potential supply is far in excess of demand. Contamination included in single-stream recycling has increased processing costs, reduced the quality of recyclable commodities, rendered otherwise recyclable materials unusable and, resulted in diversion back into the waste stream for disposal. In fact, according to a retained consultant, that which could be recovered for the recyclable commodities market in Broward County dropped precipitously between 2014 and 2016. Even though actual and experimental uses for recyclable materials do exist, this market collapse has led to the failure or consolidation of recyclables processing companies.

On July 2, 2018, the original 5-year term of the recyclables processing contracts between Sun Bergeron and communities in Broward County will expire. Seventeen Broward municipalities, representing **one-half** of the county's population, will be directly impacted. Recently, Coral Springs sought bids for a new recyclables processing contract; at the expiration of the bid period, no responsive bids were received. This was the final warning of a crisis.

Because Waste Management owns the only single stream recycling facility in Broward, impacted Broward municipalities have very limited options: attempt to negotiate new agreements with substantially higher costs; negotiate hauling contracts to take recyclable materials out of county; dispose of recyclables as solid waste in waste-to-energy or otherwise until a recyclables processing contract can be secured; convert single stream recycling programs back to dual stream collection; or discontinue recycling programs. None of the options are palatable and some are outright repugnant to what we know we must do collectively for the environment.

A working group of municipalities and Broward County have been collaborating and a consultant has been retained to evaluate options, including utilizing current available government owned properties to address the recycling dilemma. Evaluating regional opportunities to improve recycling outcomes, including the development of new processing technology, markets and uses (e.g., processing glass to make sand for aggregate, landscaping, clean fill, etc.) is critical to maximize the value of our waste reduction efforts.

ONLY \$1 FOR 6 MONTHS!
It is clear that the only practical way to **save money** improve recycling outcomes county-wide, **Hurry, sale ends 12/4** reduce our exposure to consolidated for-profit business models that jeopardize competition, and to

provide for long-term solutions to Broward County's solid waste and recycling issues is through a regional government system. Without regionalization in a collaborative and fair system, we will fail in our mission of sustainability.

Mike Ryan is the mayor of Sunrise, Florida. Daniel Stermer is the mayor of Weston, Florida.

Follow the Opinion section on Twitter @SoFlaOpinion or Facebook

Copyright © 2018. Sun Sentinel

Missing comments? We've turned off comments across Sun Sentinel while we review our commenting platform and consider ways to improve the system. If you purchased points through the Solid Opinion platform and would like a refund, please let us know at circsupport@tronc.com.

ONLY \$1 FOR 6 MONTHS!
Hurry, sale ends 12/4

SAVE NOW ›

CLIMATE

The New York Times

Your Recycling Gets Recycled, Right? Maybe, or Maybe Not

Plastics and papers from dozens of American cities and towns are being dumped in landfills after China stopped recycling most “foreign garbage.”



By [Livia Althack-Rinke](#)

May 29, 2018

Oregon is serious about recycling. Its residents are accustomed to dutifully separating milk cartons, yogurt containers, cereal boxes and kombucha bottles from their trash to divert them from the landfill. But this year, because of a far-reaching rule change in China, some of the recyclables are ending up in the local dump anyway.

In recent months, in fact, thousands of tons of material left curbside for recycling in dozens of American cities and towns — including several in Oregon — have gone to landfills.

In the past, the municipalities would have shipped much of their used paper, plastics and other scrap materials to China for processing. But as part of a broad antipollution campaign, China announced last summer that it no longer wanted to import “foreign garbage.” Since Jan. 1 it has banned imports of various types of plastic and paper, and tightened standards for materials it does accept.

While some waste managers already send their recyclable materials to be processed domestically, or are shipping more to other countries, others have been unable to find a substitute for the Chinese market. “All of a sudden, material being collected on the street doesn’t have a place to go,” said Pete Keller, vice president of recycling and sustainability at Republic Services, one of the largest waste managers in the country.

China’s stricter requirements also mean that loads of recycling are more likely to be considered contaminated if they contain materials that are not recyclable. That has compounded a problem that waste managers call wishful or aspirational recycling: people setting aside items for recycling because they believe or hope they are recyclable, even when they aren’t.

[Here’s a guide to avoiding “aspirational recycling.” First lesson: Don’t recycle greasy pizza boxes.]

In the Pacific Northwest, Republic has diverted more than 2,000 tons of paper to landfills since the Chinese ban came into effect, Mr. Keller said. The company has been unable to move that material to a market “at any price or cost,” he said. Though Republic is dumping only a small portion of its total inventory so far — the company handles over five million tons of recyclables nationwide each year — it sent little to no paper to landfills last year.

But for smaller companies, like Rogue Disposal and Recycling, which serves much of Oregon, the Chinese ban has upended operations. Rogue sent all its recycling to landfills for the first few months of the year, said Garry Penning, a spokesman.

CLIMATE



Wiqun Ang for The New York Times

Western states, which have relied the most on Chinese recycling plants, have been hit especially hard. In some areas — like Eugene, Ore., and parts of Idaho, Washington, Alaska and Hawaii — local officials and garbage haulers will no longer accept certain items for recycling, in some cases refusing most plastics, glass and certain types of paper. Instead, they say, customers should throw these items in the trash.

Theresa Byrne, who lives in Salem, Ore., said the city took too long to inform residents that most plastics and egg and milk cartons were now considered garbage. “I was angry,” she said. “I believe in recycling.”

Other communities, like Grants Pass, Ore., home to about 37,000 people, are continuing to encourage their residents to recycle as usual, but the materials are winding up in landfills anyway. Local waste managers said they were concerned that if they told residents to stop recycling, it could be hard to get them to start again.

It is “difficult with the public to turn the spigot on and off,” said Brian Fuller, a waste manager with the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

The fallout has spread beyond the West Coast. Ben Harvey, the president of E.L. Harvey & Sons, a recycling company based in Westborough, Mass., said that he had around 6,000 tons of paper and cardboard piling up, when he would normally have a couple hundred tons stockpiled. The bales are filling almost half of his 80,000-square-foot facility.

“It’s really impacted our day-to-day operations,” Mr. Harvey said. “It’s stifling me.”

Recyclers in Canada, Australia, Britain, Germany and other parts of Europe have also scrambled to find alternatives.

Still, across much of the United States, including most major cities, recycling is continuing as usual. Countries like India, Vietnam and Indonesia are importing more of the materials that are not processed domestically. And some waste companies have responded to China’s ban by stockpiling material while looking for new processors, or hoping that China reconsiders its policy.

CLIMATE

The New York Times

Republic Services collecting recycled materials in Kent, Wash.
Wiqan Ang for The New York Times

Americans recycle roughly 66 million tons of material each year, according to the most recent figures from the Environmental Protection Agency, about one-third of which is exported. The majority of those exports once went to China, said David Biderman, the executive director of the Solid Waste Association of North America, a research and advocacy group.

But American scrap exports to China fell by about 35 percent in the first two months of this year, after the ban was implemented, said Joseph Pickard, chief economist for the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries, a trade group.

"It's a huge concern, because China has just been such a dominant overseas market for us," Mr. Pickard said.

In particular, exports of scrap plastic to China, valued at more than \$300 million in 2015, totaled just \$7.6 million in the first quarter of this year, down 90 percent from a year earlier, Mr. Pickard said. Other countries have stepped in to accept more plastics, but total scrap plastic exports are still down by 40 percent this year, he said.

"There is a significant disruption occurring to U.S. recycling programs," Mr. Biderman said. "The concern is if this is the new normal."

Curbside recycling is typically hauled by a private company to a sorting plant, where marketable goods are separated out. Companies or local governments then sell the goods to domestic or overseas processors. Some states and cities prohibit these companies from dumping plastic, paper and cardboard, but some local officials — including in Oregon, Massachusetts and various municipalities in Washington State — have granted waivers so that unmarketable materials can be sent to the landfill.

Recycling companies "used to get paid" by selling off recyclable materials, said Peter Spendelow, a policy analyst for the Department of Environmental Quality in Oregon. "Now they're paying to have someone take it away."

In some places, including parts of Idaho, Maine and Pennsylvania, waste managers are continuing to recycle but are passing higher costs on to customers, or are considering doing so.

"There are some states and some markets where mixed paper is at a negative value," said Brent Bell, vice president of recycling at Waste Management, which handles 10 million tons of recycling per year. "We'll let our customers make that decision, if they'd like to pay more and continue to recycle or to pay less and have it go to landfill."

CLIMATE

The New York Times

Wiqun Ang for The New York Times

Mr. Spendelow said companies in rural areas, which tend to have higher expenses to get their materials to market, were being hit particularly hard. "They're literally taking trucks straight to the landfill," he said.

Will Posegate, the chief operations officer for Garten Services, which processes recycling for a number of counties in Oregon, said his company had tried to stockpile recyclables but eventually used a waiver to dump roughly 900 tons. "The warehouse builds up so much that it's unsafe," he said.

In California, officials are concerned that improperly stored bales of paper could become hazards during wildfire season, said Zoe Heller, the policy director for the state's recycling department.

While China has entirely banned 24 materials, including post-consumer plastic and mixed paper, it has also demanded that other materials, such as cardboard and scrap metal, be only 0.5 percent impure. Even a small amount of food scraps or other rubbish, if undetected, can ruin a batch of recycling.

Some waste managers say that China's new contamination standards are impossible to meet, while others are trying to clean up their recycling streams by slowing down their processing facilities, limiting the types of materials they accept or trying to better educate customers on what belongs in the recycling bin.

Waste traveling along a conveyor belt to be sorted. Wiqun Ang for The New York Times

Mr. Bell, the Waste Management executive, said he had seen everything from Christmas lights to animal carcasses to artillery shells come through the company's recycling facilities. "Most of our facilities get a bowling ball every day or two," he said.

Some materials can ruin a load, he said, while others pose fire or health hazards and can force facilities to slow their operations and in some cases temporarily shut down. (And a bowling ball could do serious damage to the equipment.) Approximately 25 percent of all recycling picked up by Waste Management is contaminated to the point that it is sent to landfills, Mr. Bell said.

Recyclers have always disposed of some of their materials. But the percentage has climbed as China and other buyers of recyclable material have ratcheted up quality standards.

Most contamination, Mr. Bell said, happens when people try to recycle materials they shouldn't. Disposable coffee cups — which are usually lined with a thin film that makes them liquid-proof but challenging and expensive to reprocess — are an example. Unwashed plastics can also cause contamination.

"If we don't get it clean, we're not going to be able to market it, and if we can't market it unfortunately it's going to go to the landfill," said Mr. Penning, the Rogue spokesman. In March, Rogue told customers to put everything in the trash except for corrugated cardboard, milk jugs, newspapers and tin and aluminum cans, which the company is finding domestic markets for, Mr. Penning said.

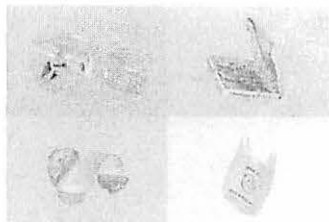
Rogue customers who make mistakes might see an "Oops" sticker the next time they check their recycling bin, he said.

In Eugene, similar restrictions have been imposed by the waste company Sanipac. These have not sat well with some residents. "Eugene is a very green city and people love their recycling here," said Diane Peterson, a resident. "There are a lot of things like yogurt containers that we get all the time, and now we can't recycle them."

Leah Geocaris, another Eugene resident, said the change had prompted her to try to consume less overall. "On the one hand, I hate it, because I don't want stuff to end up in landfill," she said. "On the other hand, it's a wake-up call."

"Recycling is the third R," she said. "You have to reduce and reuse first."

Here's how to recycle smarter



6 Things You're Recycling Wrong

Can you recycle coffee cups or greasy pizza boxes? If you're tossing things in the recycling bin out of sheer hope, you might be an "aspirational recycler."

May 29, 2018

Livia Albeck-Ripka is a freelance journalist based in New York and Melbourne, Australia.
[@livia_ar](#)

A version of this article appears in print on May 31, 2018, on Page B1 of the New York edition with the headline: Your Recyclables Get Recycled, Right?

READ 385 COMMENTS

U.S. Recycling Markets in Free Fall After China Pulls Import Plug

China has stopped purchasing the recyclables that millions of Americans place curbside on recycling days, upending the industry. Recyclables are already directed toward landfills as domestic markets are sought. Berkeley, Calif. may go a novel route.

May 16, 2018, 12pm PDT | [Irvin Dawid](#)



robertwcoy / [Shutterstock](#)

Just as Americans can count on Chinese manufacturers filling the shelves of Walmarts, they could also count on China's recycling companies buying the tons of mixed-paper and plastic, metal, and glass picked-up by waste-hauling companies and processed by domestic recyclers.

"China last week suspended all imports of U.S. recycled materials until June 4...effectively cut[ting] off exports from the U.S., the world's largest generator of scrap paper and plastic," reports Bob Tita for *The Wall Street Journal* on May 13. "The recycling industry interpreted the move as part of the growing rift between the U.S. and China over trade policies and tariffs."

Used newspapers, cardboard boxes and plastic bottles are piling up at plants that can't make a profit processing them for export or domestic markets.

Tita writes that recyclers are going to have to find domestic markets for the materials they collect; "a long-term issue," said one industry analyst. In the meantime, more recyclables will likely end up in landfills.

Until recently, waste-hauling companies were paying cities for their recyclables, but that changed when China tightened standards for contamination to 0.5%.

As cities aggressively expanded recycling programs to keep more discarded household items out of landfills, the purity of U.S. scrap deteriorated as more trash infiltrated the recyclables. Discarded food, liquid-soaked paper and other contaminants recently accounted for as much as 20% of the material shipped to China, according to Waste Management Inc.'s estimates, double from five years ago.

Waste-haulers have begun charging customers to collect recyclables as prices have dropped. Asian nations that are accepting mixed paper and plastics dropped their prices from \$150 per ton last year to \$5 this year after "China stopped taking shipments of U.S. mixed paper and mixed plastic in January," adds Tita.

Sacramento County used to earn \$1.2 million a year selling scrap to Waste Management and another processor that county employees collected from 151,000 homes. Now, the county is paying what will amount to about \$1 million a year, or roughly \$35 a ton, to defray the processors' costs. Waste Management paid the county \$250,000 to break the revenue-sharing contract and negotiate those terms.

Other changes include some cities ending "single-stream" recycling, where all recyclables go in one bin, in order to reduce contamination. Mixed plastic may no longer be salvageable due to lack of markets.

Alternative strategies

"It's going to take domestic demand to replace what China was buying," said William Moore, president of Moore & Associates, a recycled paper consultancy in Atlanta. "It's not going to be a quick turnaround. It's going to be a long-term issue."

The "Three Rs" approach to sustainable waste management

The U. S. Environmental Protection Agency reminds us that recycling is the "third R": reduce and reuse, respectively, come first and second. With that approach in mind, "[t]he City of Berkeley, California, has introduced the Disposable Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance, the most ambitious and comprehensive piece of municipal legislation in the U.S. aimed at reducing single-use disposable foodware," according to the Plastic Pollution Coalition's announcement on April 26. [See KPIX video on proposed ordinance].

"Under the ordinance, to-go-food containers would have to be 100 percent compostable or recyclable, with some exceptions," reports Kimberly Veklerov for the *San Francisco Chronicle* on April 24.

Customers would pay 25 cents per cup or container, and restaurants would keep the proceeds to purchase more environmentally friendly food ware. Straws, napkins and coffee stirrers would be free upon request.

"The idea that we can just use stuff and recycle it and it'll be rosy on the other end is just not the reality," said Councilwoman Sophie Hahn, who proposed the ordinance with Mayor Jesse Arreguin. "We simply have to change our relationship with disposable food ware and ultimately all disposable items."

The principle behind the Disposable Foodware and Litter Reduction Ordinance is based on ordinances that banned single-use plastic bags adopted by a large number of California cities. In 2014, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed legislation that made the ban statewide. Customers who fail to bring reusable bags to the market can purchase a paper bag or reusable plastic bag for a dime. Two years later, voters rejected a plastics industry-backed referendum of the legislation that would have repealed the legislation.

However, other states have not followed this "reuse" path. In fact, Arizona, Missouri, and Michigan have taken the opposite path, banning cities from adopting single-use plastic bag bans. According to the Sierra Club, as of last December, seven states prohibit cities from adopting ordinances to ban single-use plastic bags.

Click here to access the original *Wall Street Journal* article [behind a paywall for those without subscription].

Recycling's new reality: 'When in doubt, throw it out'

ADVERTISEMENT

Florida's new Rethink, Reset, Recycle program suggests that residents make sure they're putting the right materials in their bins. The state campaign says, "When in doubt, throw it out."



By **Larry Barszewski**
South Florida Sun Sentinel

JUNE 28, 2018, 9:05 PM

If you fear that some of the stuff you've recycled is winding up at the landfill, you're right. And the situation could get worse.

New contracts for recycling could cost taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars and force residents to do a better job of keeping non-recyclables out of their recycling bins.

If they don't, the cost will go up even more, and more could wind up in the landfill.

Recycling programs are in a crisis nationwide as China, historically the leading buyer of U.S. recyclables, stopped accepting loads of mixed paper and mixed plastic this year. It also has set more stringent standards for the quality of materials it will take.

In addition, people are recycling more material than the market can absorb. When recycling programs don't have a buyer for a product, they have little choice but to send the materials to the dump.

The crisis is making local recycling programs more expensive at the same time the value of their recycled material has diminished.

Seventeen Broward cities in particular are feeling the effects of the recycling difficulties. Their current recycling contracts end Monday. The firm they signed with, the Sun-Bergeron Joint Venture, is not renewing those contracts, forcing most of the cities to turn to Waste Management to provide recycling at a much higher charge — going from \$51.15 a ton to \$96 a ton for processing the material.

If residents don't improve their recycling habits — and keep non-recyclable waste separate from the recyclables — Waste Management could reject truckloads it deems too contaminated and then charge a city for hauling the material away to be dumped.

Some cities could end up taking their recyclables directly to south Broward incinerators to be burned in the waste-to-energy plant — hardly the type of recycling residents had in mind when they took the time to separate materials and placed them in recycling bins.

“At least for the short term, I think that's something that some cities are going to have to look at,” said Sunrise City Manager Richard Salamon, whose city has yet to come to an agreement with Waste Management. Salamon fears Waste Management has created a new monopoly in the county.

“This is a very difficult situation. We really are stuck here. We have only bad options,” Salamon said.

Keeping non-recyclables and other contaminants out of the recycling stream is more difficult in Broward County, which has “single-stream recycling,” which means residents put paper, glass, bottles and cans all into the same recycling cart.

“Whenever you give somebody a 96-gallon cart, residents want to fill it,” said Willie Puz, spokesman for the Palm Beach County Solid Waste Authority. Palm Beach County residents use separate containers, a yellow bin for paper and cardboard and a blue bin for plastic, glass and cans.

Plastic bags for 6 months. Residential recycling bins put out at the curb. Neither do polystyrene containers — like the ones restaurants use for leftovers or take-out meals — even if the container has

a recycling triangle on it. Grease-stained pizza boxes and wet paper are no-nos, too, as they will ruin the rest of the paper and cardboard they're mixed with at recycling facilities.

"There's a lot of 'wish' recycling that's going on," Puz said.

Waste Management says it sees roughly 30 percent contamination in the recyclables coming into its Broward facility, while Palm Beach County says its contamination has been between 8 percent and 9 percent of the recycling stream.

In 2016, the most recent year figures are available, Broward County recycled about 1.2 million of the 3.6 million tons of solid waste it collected, or 34 percent. It received credit for another 484,000 tons of trash burned at a waste-to-energy facility to produce electricity, giving it an overall 48 percent recycling percentage.

Palm Beach County recycled 1.4 million of the 3.1 million tons of waste it collected, or 45 percent. It received credit for 828,000 tons of waste it incinerated, for an overall 72 percent recycling rate. Miami-Dade County recycled about 1.4 million of the 4.4 million tons it collected, or 33 percent. It was credited with 438,000 tons of waste burned to produce energy, giving it an overall 43 percent recycling rate.

Florida has a goal of having 75 percent of its solid waste recycled by 2020 — that includes garbage and trash burned in incinerators to produce electricity — but it's not likely the goal will be achieved as the Broward and Miami-Dade figures show. The state also is concerned about the contamination and the threat it poses to recycling success.

It has started a new "Rethink. Reset. Recycle." campaign, where it asks people to focus on recycling a few basic items: Aluminum and steel cans, plastic bottles and jugs, paper and cardboard.

"When in doubt, throw it out," the state campaign says. It's better to throw out something that is recyclable than to include something that isn't and risk contaminating a load of "good" recyclables.

Dawn McCormick, a spokeswoman for Waste Management, said there's still a lot more recycling of the basics that can be done. Fewer than one out of every five empty aluminum cans — one of the highest-value recyclables — or plastic bottles ever gets placed in a recycling bin, McCormick said.

She said it could take a better job by residents to really improve the recycling numbers.

"If you're out driving, drinking a bottle of water, drive those materials home," McCormick said.

"Remember, if you're not sure if it's garbage, take it home and recycle it."

Hurry, sale ends 12/4

SAVE NOW