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Recycling Reversal

Overseas Ban on Waste Changes
What Most Pennsylvanians
Can Put in Their Bin

If you're like most Americans, you probably have not given much thought to what happens to that plastic bottle, glass jar, or newspaper you put in your recycling container. You figure it is being recycled somehow, and by keeping it out of the landfill, you are doing your part to make planet Earth a better place.

This "out-of-sight, out-of-mind" mentality came to a screeching halt earlier this year when the recycling industry was rocked by action out of China. What most people did not realize until then was that the items they had been recycling, week in and week out, were likely being shipped to China, the world's largest consumer of recyclables.

On January 1, in an anti-pollution crackdown, China implemented a ban on certain recyclables from other countries, most notably mixed paper (such as junk mail) and mixed plastic (those labeled three through seven), and enacted stricter rules about the level of contamination it would accept on other materials.

As a result of a decision made halfway across the globe, what can now go in your recycling bin has likely changed, and if it hasn't yet, it will soon. Without China as a major market, recyclers are being forced to find other outlets, and until new markets pick up the slack, what was once considered a recyclable has become trash.

Communities and consumers are scrambling to adapt to the new realities of recycling.

For some, China's ban has forced local recycling programs back to the basics and shifted their focus to materials with traditionally strong markets, such as corrugated cardboard, plastic bottles and jugs with necks, metal food and beverage cans, and glass bottles and jars. Others are exploring whether it makes sense to halt recycling altogether until the marketplace rebounds.

Meanwhile, amid these changes, Pennsylvania's recycling law is celebrating its 30th birthday. The trouble is, the future of recycling has never looked murkier.

A shift in recycling

Thirty years ago, Pennsylvania developed the most sweeping recycling program enacted by any state at that time.

Today, recycling has become a way of life for most Pennsylvanians. More than 11.6 million residents — about 94 percent of the state's population — have access to recycling, including about 79 percent who have the convenience of curbside pickup.

Over the years, recycling initiatives have faced challenges as markets ebbed and flowed, and despite current conditions, the commonwealth's program will rebound again, state Secretary of Environmental Protection Patrick McDonnell predicts.

Still, the latest news out of China has sent a large shock wave through the recycling industry and caused a major disruption to the recycling loop, which consists of the user or sorter, the processor, and the buyer.

“Suddenly, the buyer went away, and there was nowhere for the material to go,” Kathryn Sandoe, chief communications officer at the Lancaster County Solid Waste Management Authority, says.

With limited markets, communities mandated to recycle are re-evaluating what items are valuable enough to still collect and sell. Earlier this year, Lancaster County, one of the first areas in Pennsylvania to react to the market collapse, cut out some long-time recycling staples and trimmed its curbside recycling to four items that it believes have had traditionally strong domestic markets.

“We looked at marketability and wanted to ensure that the materials could still be sold six months, a year, two years from now,” Sandoe says.

With such a major change to its program, the authority has focused its efforts on re-educating people on what can be recycled and how to prepare it (flatten cardboard, empty and rinse containers, remove lids).

“We know we are challenging many long-held beliefs of recycling, and the initial reaction has been surprise and shock,” she says, noting that she's hopeful that curiosity, understanding, and finally adaptation will follow.

And while it may seem that the changes took place overnight, they were in the making for a while.

Reducing contaminants

For many years, China's insatiable appetite for recyclables masked the problems of contamination in the nation's recycling stream.

Part of the problem can be traced back to how easy recycling had become, especially once many programs implemented single-stream collection, allowing all recyclables to be placed together for pickup and sorting later at a processing facility. Too many people made assumptions that just about everything could be recycled — tin foil, drinking glasses, plastic toys, even garden hoses — when in reality, they couldn't.

And now that China has lowered its boom, communities that still want to recycle — whether because of a state mandate or because they believe it's the right thing to do — must find ways to provide a clean, quality product.

According to Earth911.com, a website dedicated to encouraging less waste, the answer to U.S. recycling woes starts with clear recycling guidance for consumers, who sort recyclables

from the rest of their waste. An effective education program could help to put an end to what the industry calls “wishful recycling,” trying to recycle things that aren’t recyclable.

Many solid waste handlers have begun asking customers to be more diligent about their recycling habits, and “when in doubt, throw it out” has become the mantra of the new post-China recycling guidelines.

While it remains to be seen how recycling rebounds from this latest market setback, in the short term at least, costs for local programs will almost certainly rise as recyclers pass on increased costs to customers.

Some in the industry, however, see this latest crisis as just another blip in the inevitable rise and fall of markets.

Only time, of course, will tell.