

In Depth: Cities Struggle with Curbside Recycling as China Ban Affects Infrastructure

May 21, 2019 by Jennifer Hermes



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A combination of factors is leading to the reduction or suspension of curbside recycling programs in some US cities. China's ban on the import of previously accepted types of recyclable materials, a significant decrease in the resale price that recycling centers are getting for the recyclable goods they collect, and increasing problems with contamination are causing challenges all along the value chain.

In Louisiana, New Orleans is suspending the acceptance of certain plastics via curbside collections. The move comes after recycling processor Republic Services announced that its recycling center in Metairie will no longer accept items from residential, single stream curbside collections. Republic Services said that an increase in costs due to China's ban on certain imports is partly responsible for the decision to reduce the types of materials it accepts.

While New Orleans recognizes how important the recycling program is, the city acknowledges that recycling is facing significant challenges, says Ramsey Green, deputy chief administrative officer for infrastructure.

In Auburn, Maine, the city council has mullied whether to temporarily [suspend curbside recycling](#) due to rising costs, with the possibility of reinstating it after it has time to "completely restructure the system," writes the Auburn Sun Journal.

And curbside recycle in Perry County, Missouri, has been suspended completely due to "rising operational costs and [global decreases in recyclable commodity](#) values," according to Waste Today.

Big Solutions Needed

Recyclers are struggling to find solutions to the problems of rising costs and an increasing amount of low-quality or "nonrecyclable" material coming into their material recovery facilities (MRFs). In the meantime, cities are finding that their recycling programs are operating at a deficit. In Perry County, the recycling center is struggling to find a market for its recyclables. In fact, much of what it takes in is likely to end up in landfills while the US attempts to discover ways to use the products that China will no longer accept, according to Sheila Schnurbusch, a supervisor at Waste Management.

At the same time, the prices the recycling center is getting for resale of its materials is plummeting. In 2015, cardboard brought in around \$200 a ton, compared to just \$60 a ton today, Schnurbusch says.

Making Lemonade...

While some are struggling with the effects of the China ban, others think it may be the boost needed to expand and improve recycling infrastructure in the US.

Investors are stepping in to spur expansion at recycling facilities and paper mills. One of the world's largest producers of cardboard boxes, Hong-Kong based Nine Dragons, has [invested \\$500 million](#) over the past year on paper mills in Maine, Wisconsin and West Virginia, according to the Associated Press.

A recycling company in New Jersey installed machinery to process scrap plastic film it used to send to China. The film is processed into pellets, which the company now sells profitably to garbage bag and plastic pipe manufacturers.

"It's a very good moment for recycling in the United States," says Neil Seldman, co-founder of the Institute for Local Self-Reliance, a Washington-based organization that helps cities improve recycling programs.

According to a report last fall from the Northeast Recycling Council, 17 North American paper mills had announced increased capacity to handle recyclable paper since the China ban took effect. Brian Boland, VP of government affairs and corporate initiatives for Nine Dragons' US affiliate, ND Paper, says that the change and growth occurring in the paper industry is "frankly amazing."



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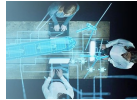
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