

## WESTMORELAND



## Tough year for recycling industry to continue as China holds fast on tougher rules



PATRICK VARINE | Sunday, Dec. 16, 2018, 1:36 a.m.



China once accepted 30 to 40 percent of U.S. paper, plastic and metal recyclables, with recyclable materials from here being the sixth-largest import to the Chinese economy, according to the Pennsylvania Recycling Markets Center.



Recycling rules change frequently and differ from one community to the next, one hauler to the next and one country to the next.

That final difference made waves in the U.S. recycling industry throughout 2018, with China enforcing its National Sword policy — a rigorous set of new rules that ban 24 types of solid waste such as certain plastics and unsorted mixed paper products. The largest consumer of U.S. recycling also restricted accepting recycled fiber goods that are less than 99.5 percent free of contaminants.

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In 2016, China imported 16.2 million tons of U.S. recyclables, the Solid Waste Association of North America reported. Since January, it has accepted very little because of the new restrictions.

How that has impacted the recycling industry in Western Pennsylvania largely depends on who you ask.

"We're really focusing on contamination and trying to eliminate it at the curb," said Erika Deyarmin-Young, a spokeswoman for Waste Management. "Our recycling facility is strongly enforcing our contamination guidelines, and our drivers are spot-checking commercial recycling containers at the curb prior to collection."

Heavily contaminated material won't be accepted as recycling.

"And the customer may face a monetary penalty," Deyarmin-Young said.

Contamination spot checks for residential customers starts at the beginning of 2019, she said.

Jerry Powell, executive editor for industry trade publication Recycling Resources Inc., said Chinese policy on recycling has affected industry sectors in different ways.

"China banned certain plastics, what we'd call numbers 3 through 7, but that type of plastic only represents about 5 percent of total recycled plastics," Powell said.

Waste Management this week announced that it will cease accepting certain plastics and all glass in communities from Allegheny County's South Hills to Ohio.

Republic Services, another major hauler in Western Pennsylvania, in September stopped accepting those types of plastics from local communities, including Delmont.

The company did not respond to requests for comment.

The contamination policy, also known as a sorting standard, has had a much larger effect.

"The sorting standards are so tight that for many processors, it's essentially a ban," Powell said. "Sorting standards are much higher, and so costs are much higher," Powell said. "The net effect is that there is an increased effort by Chinese as well as North American processors to wash and ship clean plastic to China, rather than just taking bales of plastic from the curbs of places like Western Pennsylvania."

Single-stream 'solution'?

For Justin Stockdale, regional director of the Pennsylvania Resources Council, the gradual shift toward single-stream recycling has played a large role in where the U.S. finds itself.

"It's not really just about the U.S. and China," Stockdale said. "It's more about how First World economies got used to sending dirtier and dirtier materials to Third World and Asian markets."

When he was recycling paper in the 1990s, Stockdale said he was required to adhere to the same standard — 0.5 percent contaminants in shipments of

Don't bagit

One of the biggest issues recyclers run into when it comes to contamination may seem counter-intuitive: plastic bags.

"Plastic bags are the No. 1 cause of contamination," said Erika Deyarmin-Young, a spokeswoman for Waste Management.

It's not that the bags aren't recyclable. It's that they require a different collection system and different processing equipment than most curbside recyclers use.

Waste Management workers spend an inordinate amount of time untangling plastic bags from the sorting machines at their material recovery facilities, Deyarmin-Young said.

"Place items loose into your recycling bin," she said.

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recyclables — that China has imposed.

"It was difficult, but we were able to do it," he said. "By moving to single-stream, the American collection system was unable to meet those standards, which is part of what precipitated the move to shipping materials to Asia."

When recycling began gaining traction nationally, consumers were used to cleaning and separating recyclables by commodity type: plastic, glass, paper, aluminum, etc.

"When we switched to single-stream, recycling became this sort of feel-good, ridiculous thing that eventually reached the point where recycling companies told people, 'Well, if you're not sure, just throw it in the bin and someone else will take care of it.'"

Stockdale likened single-stream recycling to scrambling an egg.

"Single-stream recycling facilities are like trying to unscramble an egg, which no one has so far figured out how to do," he said. "You can never get things 100 percent clean in a single-stream plant, and therein lies the root of the problem."

Renewed commitment

On Nov. 15, America Recycles Day, [Trump issued a statement](#) renewing the country's commitment to reduce and recycle waste, hailing its impact on improving the economy and environment. That day, the Environmental Protection Agency also hosted its [first recycling summit](#) to bring together industry leaders and government agencies to talk about ways to strengthen the domestic recycling market.

The summit identified four areas of focus extending into 2019:

- Education and outreach.
- Enhancing materials management infrastructure.
- Strengthening secondary materials markets.
- Enhancing measurement.

Other nations have stepped in to snag a market share in the recyclables that Chinese companies are leaving at the curb, so to speak.

"More plastic is moving to domestic markets, and paper is moving to alternative markets across the globe," Deyarmin-Young said. "Over the past five years, Waste Management has built a large network of end users in the U.S., South America, Europe, India and other countries in southeast Asia. We've been able to move material, albeit at a much slower rate and at lower, sometimes negative, pricing."

Powell said that in the wake of new Chinese regulations going into effect, south Asian countries like Vietnam and Malaysia "immediately took advantage by buying up the bales China was rejecting."

"And what happened was, they weren't equipped to handle so much volume," he said. "About a third of the recycling that would have gone to China is now being diverted south."

Deyarmin-Young and Powell agreed that fiber-related recycling — paper, cardboard and newspaper — is also a major issue.

"The curbside bin is dominated by fiber, and the problems associated with it are large," Powell said.

Deyarmin-Young said the alternative markets for paper "cannot consume the volumes that previously were sold to China, so there's a global oversupply of paper, which has driven quality requirements up and commodity pricing down."

The new Chinese regulations have also spurred Chinese investment in the United States, Powell said.

"The largest fiber company is called Nine Dragons," he said. "They bought four American mills (this summer), and announced they're spending \$300 million to convert a paper mill in Wisconsin to accept this mixed paper."

Seventeen paper mills across North America — 15 in the U.S. and two in Mexico — this year announced they will increase the amount of recyclable paper brought in as raw materials, the Northeast Recycling Council said last month. The list includes Nine Dragons facilities in Maine, West Virginia and Wisconsin as well as a mill in Ohio. Also on the list is a once-idled Kentucky paper mill bought this year by Shanying International, another Chinese company.

At least six domestic mills on the list will take in residential mixed paper, the NERC reported.

Yet with the tougher restrictions likely to continue impacting what is accepted and in what condition through residential recycling programs, Waste Management operates the [Recycle Often, Recycle Right](#) website to help educate the public. Deyarmin-Young said anyone can go there for tips on helping to ensure that what goes in the recycling bin ultimately gets recycled, like cleaning food or liquids from recycled material.

"Only recycle plastic bottles, jugs and jars, aluminum and tin cans, paper and cardboard," she said. "Keep it simple: when in doubt, throw it out."

Stockdale said single-stream recycling attracts contamination by its very nature.

"The attitude of just throwing it in the bin because you hope it can be recycled has to change," he said.

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