

U.S. RECYCLING



Most of us are familiar with recycling – programs that divert materials from the waste stream, sort them and send the materials to processors where they can be broken down and made into new products. Recycling has a number of benefits including reducing greenhouse gas emissions, job creation, lessening virgin material extraction, extending landfill life, and preventing pollution. Nationally, communities value their recycling programs, and the Recycling Partnership projects that the recycling industry has significant untapped potential in job creation and cutting greenhouse gases.

Although recycling programs have operated in the U.S. for decades, recent changes in the global marketplace have created major disruptions for local operations. For years, many materials recycled in the U.S. were exported to China and other Southeast Asian countries to be processed into new products. However, in 2017, China announced its National Sword Policy effectively halting the import of most foreign recyclable materials. Other countries (e.g. Vietnam, India, Thailand) have followed suit, passing similar restrictions.

Now that U.S. recycling programs can no longer rely on exporting recyclable materials abroad, there are significantly fewer processors able to accept the current volume of recyclable materials. The dramatic reduction in available processors has resulted in several challenges – processors are much more selective in the quality of recyclable materials they accept, the monetary value of recyclable materials has declined, and a larger amount of potentially recyclable materials are sent to landfills due to contamination.

Recycling contamination occurs when non-recyclable materials are mixed in with recyclables, or recyclable materials are not properly cleaned (e.g. greasy pizza boxes, or unwashed plastics).

Many agree that serious industry and supply chain-level changes are needed to support effective recycling in the future. What those changes should be are often divided into long and short-term solutions and vary depending on the type of recyclable material.

Currently, recycling programs across the nation focus on reducing recycling contamination rates in order to sustain operations. Educating the public on recycling correctly and avoiding “wish-cycling”, or recycling items that people may wish could be recycled, allow cities and businesses to continue selling recycled materials to processors and to stabilize operation costs.

Long-term solutions include changes in policy to expand domestic material processing and end markets, change product designs that limit single-use plastics, and invest in research to increase recyclability of materials. Additionally, clear public education on the current state of recycling and the value of sustaining recycling programs are foundational needs to enable all future actions.

Sources and Recommended Reading:

- [Where Will Your Plastic Trash Go Now That China Doesn't Want It?](#) NPR, March 13, 2019
- [State of Curbside Recycling in 2020](#) The Recycling Partnership, February 13th, 2020
- [How Big Oil Misled The Public Into Believing Plastic Would Be Recycled](#) NPR, August 30, 2020
- [Break Free From Plastic Act – Proposed by Tom Udall](#)