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Recycling Firms Hit by Crushing Economics

Plunging prices for scrap paper, plastics prompt cities to send some items to landfills

By BOB TITA

The U.S. recycling industry is breaking down.

Prices for scrap paper and plastic have collapsed, leading local officials across the country to charge residents more to collect recyclables and send some to landfills. 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.

"Recycling as we know it isn't working," said James Warner, chief executive of the Solid Waste Management Authority in Lancaster County, Pa. "There's always been ups and downs in the market, but this is the biggest disruption that I can recall."

U.S. recycling programs took off in the 1990s as calls to bury less trash in landfills coincided with China's demand for materials such as corrugated cardboard to feed its economic boom. Shipping lines eagerly filled containers that had brought manufactured goods to the U.S. with paper,

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RECYCLE

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scrap metal and plastic bottles for the return trip to China.

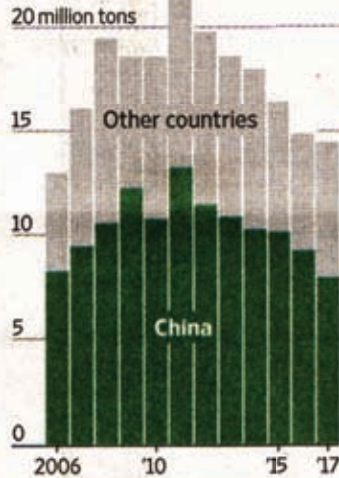
As cities aggressively expanded recycling programs to keep more discarded household items out of landfills, the purity of U.S. scrap deteriorated as more trash infiltrated the recyclables. Discarded food, liquid-soaked paper and other contaminants recently accounted for as much as 20% of the material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

The tedious and sometimes dangerous work of separating out that detritus at processing plants in China prompted officials there to slash the contaminants limit this year to 0.5%. China early this month suspended all imports of U.S. recycled materials until June 4, regardless of the quality. The recycling industry interpreted the move as part of the growing rift between the U.S. and China over trade policies and tariffs.

The changes have effectively cut off exports from the U.S., the world's largest generator of scrap paper and plastic. Collectors, processors and the municipal governments that hire them are reconsidering what they will accept to recycle and how much homeowners will pay for that ser-

Compacted

U.S. recyclable exports from California ports



Source: Cal Waste
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vice. Many trash haulers and city agencies that paid for curbside collection by selling scrap said they are now losing money on almost every ton they handle.

The upended economics are likely to permanently change the U.S. recycling business, said William Moore, president of Moore & Associates, a recycled-paper consultancy in Atlanta.

"It's going to take domestic demand to replace what China was buying," he said. "It's not going to be a quick turnaround. It's going to be a long-term issue."

The waste-management authority in Lancaster County this spring more than

doubled the charge per ton that residential trash collectors must pay to deposit recyclables at its transfer station, starting June 1. The higher cost is expected to be passed on to residents though a 3% increase in the fees that haulers charge households for trash collection and disposal.

The additional transfer-station proceeds will help offset a \$40-a-ton fee that the authority will start paying this summer to a company to process the county's recyclables. Before China raised its quality standards at the beginning of this year, that company was paying Lancaster County \$4 for every ton of recyclables.

Mr. Warner may limit the recyclable items collected from Lancaster County's 500,000 residents to those that have retained some value, such as cans and corrugated cardboard. He said mixed plastic isn't worth processing.

Pacific Rim Recycling in Benicia, Calif., slowed operations at its plant early this year to meet China's new standard. But company President Steve Moore said the more intensive sorting process takes too long to process scrap profitably. Pacific Rim idled its processing plant in February and furloughed 40 of its 45 employees.

"The cost is impossible. We can't make money at it," Steve Moore said. "We quit accepting stuff."

Processing Costs For Waste Pile Up

China stopped taking shipments of U.S. mixed paper and mixed plastic in January. Mixed-paper shipments to other Asian countries now fetch \$5 a ton, down from as much as \$150 last year. Other buyers such as Vietnam and India have been flooded with scrap paper and plastic that would have been sold to China in years past.

Dave Vaccarella, president of Cal-Waste Recovery Systems near Sacramento, Calif., intends to invest more than \$6 million in new sorting equipment to produce cleaner bales of recyclables.

"It's going to cost the rate payer to recycle," he said. "They're going to demand we make our best effort to use those cans and bottles they put out."

Sacramento County, which collects trash and recyclables from 151,000 homes, used to earn \$12 million a year selling the scrap to Waste Management and another processor. 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 new terms. County waste-management director Doug Sloan expects costs to keep climbing. "We've been put

on notice that we need to do our part," he said. The county hasn't yet raised residential fees.

Some recyclers said municipalities need to give up the "single-stream" approach of lumping used paper and cardboard together with glass, cans and plastic in one collection truck. Single-stream collections took hold about 20 years ago. Collecting paper separately would make curbside recycling service more expensive but reduce contamination.

"We're our own worst enemies," said Michael Barry, president of Mid America Recycling, a processing-plant operator in Des Moines, Iowa, of single-stream recycling. "It's almost impossible to get the paper away from the containers."