

Responsible Recycling Task Force

October 10, 2018

Problem Statement

Key challenges facing the recycling industry provide an opportunity for King County to improve and create a responsible recycling system for the future that ensures the recycling of quality materials and limits the harm that can be done “downstream” from poorly sorted, problematic, or contaminated materials. There are two problems the Responsible Recycling Task Force will address:

Short Term: China’s import restrictions (China National Sword) have reduced markets for mixed paper and mixed plastics

China’s implementation of their “National Sword” policy to restrict the importation of mixed paper (including newspaper) and mixed #3-#7 plastics has resulted in the immediate closure of a significant market for these recyclable materials. Annually, around 175,500 tons¹ of these recyclable materials that would normally go to China now need to be processed elsewhere. Alternative export and domestic markets for mixed paper and mixed plastics are extremely limited. If all King County’s mixed paper and mixed plastics were disposed, the life of Cedar Hills would be shortened by six months. However, Washington State [statute](#) identifies waste reduction and recycling as priorities over disposal in the waste management hierarchy. King County Codes 10.14.020 and 10.14.050 establish the goal to achieve zero waste of resources by 2030 and recognizes that waste reduction and recycling are the highest priority of the viable solid waste management options.

Long Term: Recycling in King County suffers from three major issues:

1. Contamination. At local MRFs around 5-10% of the tonnage processed are “residuals” that are not recycled. This does not include the contamination that ends up in bales. China’s “National Sword” policy restricts contamination in bales to 0.5%.
 - Materials entering recycling facilities are increasingly contaminated for a variety of reasons, including commingling the materials in one bins, new packaging types and resident confusion.
 - Some materials being collected as part of the approved recyclables list have no markets, contaminate other valuable recyclable material and/or, create problems in the processing system (examples include plastic bags, poly-coated paper, cartons and aseptic packaging).
2. Market vulnerability. China was the single largest consumer of recyclable materials generated in North America. One-third of all scrap material collected in the U.S. was shipped overseas, with the large majority of this material going to China. In 2016, the U.S. exported \$5.6 billion in scrap commodities to China.

¹ This figure includes both King County and the city of Seattle. The estimate is based on Dept. of Ecology “2017 Annual Report – Recycling Facility” for three recycling facilities in King County (Cascade, 3rd and Lander, Recology) and one in Pierce County (JMK) as well as recycling numbers received from the City of Seattle.

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- China has banned import of mixed paper and mixed bales of #3-7 plastics cutting off the key market for these materials.
 - Some “program” materials are sorted only to “mixed materials”, leading to mixed bales that are not market-ready.
 - There are limited domestic markets for mixed paper and mixed bales of #3-7 plastics meaning that in many cases, these materials do not have anywhere to go domestically and must be exported.
 - Alternate export markets for mixed paper and plastic bales raise social and environmental justice concerns about what is actually happening to materials, including the contaminants and non-recyclable material. A Responsible Recycling system would take responsibility for the materials we recycle and process to prevent these social and environmental impacts.
 - Local material recovery facilities have limited or no capacity for further sorting some mixed materials, such as #3-7 plastics, and are primarily focused on cleaning up their paper bales to achieve a more marketable product.
3. Recycling is not free. In many cases we have trained the public to believe that recycling is free by how we have set-up billing for waste collection services. However, revenue from the sale of recyclables typically does not offset the costs of collecting, sorting and processing the recyclable materials.
- There are domestic facilities that will provide secondary sorting to clean up materials so they are acceptable for sale to markets but there is a cost associated with secondary sorting, which exceeds the cost to export to Southeast Asia.
 - Haulers/MRFs are asking for waivers to landfill and/or surcharges to pay for additional sorting/processing costs.
 - Disposal of recyclables uses landfill capacity and may erode the public trust in recycling.

Goals and Outcomes

- **Short Term Goal:** To help identify near (1 year), mid (2-3 year) and long-term (4+ years) actions in response to reduction in export markets for mixed recyclable materials due to China National Sword policies.
- **Longer Term Goal:** To help establish commitment across the region to responsible recycling and domestic sorting/processing of curbside recyclables.
- **Outcomes:** Prepare a report with actionable items and recommendations for future action by all; if possible, develop interim tools for communications and other topics that are more immediately available.
- **Role of Task Force:** Not to make decisions, rather to learn about the problem, understand activities that are being implemented elsewhere and opportunities for change. The Task Force will provide guidance on next steps that will be brought back to King County advisory committees and decision makers.