

Under China's New Rules, U.S. Recycling Suffers

Some cities are closing recycling plants. Others are ending curbside pickup. For recycling to be sustainable, consumers must learn to sort their trash better.

by [Alan Greenblatt](#) | December 2018



(Shutterstock)

Ever since cities began offering curbside recycling programs, skeptics have joked about how it all ends up going to the same place as the garbage. In Franklin, N.H., that's actually true.

Residents there still sort items into separate recycling bins and garbage cans, but the different material all gets hauled to the same incinerator. "We are currently disposing of all of it at the trash plant," says Judie Milner, Franklin's city manager, "because recycling costs are twice as high."

Those costs have spiked all over. Until this past January, China took 40 percent of America's gently used paper, metals and plastic. Now, it accepts hardly any of it. China won't take recycled material from this country, or others, unless it's 99.5 percent free of contaminants. Some of the material is currently being processed domestically or is getting sent to other countries, but the loss of the biggest market has led some domestic recycling plants to shut down and some cities to end curbside pickup of recyclables.

Cities could once count on processors to pay them for material, but now they're being presented with hefty bills instead. Last year, Richland, Wash., received \$16 per ton for its recyclables. Today, it pays \$122 for each ton that's hauled away. When Franklin began its recycling program in 2010, it was getting paid \$6 per ton for the material. Now, it has to pay \$129 to dispose of it. Burning it, along with the regular garbage, is a lot cheaper at \$68 a ton. "We put all our eggs in one basket with China," Milner says.

Franklin is still asking its residents to separate out the recycling, in hopes that the situation can be rectified. Recycling advocates say that waste disposers ignored China's admonishments about contaminants for years. "China has been warning us for a decade that we need to clean up the recycling," says Mitch Hedlund, executive director of Recycle Across America, "but the industry did not heed the warning."

The problem starts with consumers. For too long, they've taken what waste experts describe as a "wishful" approach to recycling. Everything they hope can be recycled -- Christmas lights, batteries, plastic bags, hoses, power cords -- has been tossed into the blue bins, ruining the mix. Those Christmas lights, power cords and other long, stringy, unrecyclable items get tangled up in the gears at recycling plants, particularly those dealing with mixed, single-stream loads. That fouls up the machines, causing delays and driving up costs. "If they'd had any questions in their minds about whether something is recyclable, they've been encouraged to put it in the bins," says Sara Bixby of the Solid Waste Association of North America. "We have to stop that."

Educating consumers can make a big difference in terms of how much they recycle, as well as whether they're doing it right. That pizza box may be recyclable, but not if it's soaked with grease. "Recycling isn't worth anything right now," says Madison Hopkins, an investigative reporter with the Better Government Association in Chicago. "That's because people don't know how to recycle and [so when they do] it's contaminated."

Hedlund's group is working with cities and corporations to encourage the use of standardized labels, so consumers know exactly what's recyclable. Once the public schools in Orlando, Fla., started using labels, the system saved \$370,000 per year in trash hauling. "Cities are spending a fortune on recycling programs," she says, "that aren't working."



[Alan Greenblatt](#) | Staff Writer | agreenblatt@governing.com
