

This FAQ was developed by the Washington Refuse & Recycling Association

3 Things to Remember:

1. You should put your garbage and recycling at the curb (or whatever your normal routine is) and it will be collected just like it always has been.
2. If you do not know whether or not something can be recycled, throw it in the garbage. **WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT!**
3. Every city and county recycling program is different. Check with your local solid waste program for the best information available specific to your area.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Isn't there always a place for recycled material? Why do we rely on China?

The recycling system is 100% dependent on a marketplace for recyclable materials. Whether it is plastic, paper, or aluminum, we are only able to offer a service to collect and process it for you, if in turn, someone is going to buy it from us and use it for manufacturing or other purposes. A strong recycling system is good for the environment and for the economy. Today's situation is unique because China is a primary source of manufactured products and packaging. Their policy change transpired quickly, something that is challenging for infrastructure services like solid waste and recycling collections and processing because it is so complex.

Why do Chinese policies affect my recycling service?

Washington, Oregon, and California are particularly impacted by China's policy change because the West Coast is active in trade with China and other countries where imports/exports are made easier because of where they are located. Washington's recycling rate hovers around 50%, well above the national average, in part because of its proximity to China. China is also one of the biggest manufacturers in the world – named the #1 Most Competitive Manufacturing Nation in 2016 by Deloitte, a global financial and consulting firm and consuming 2/3 of all recyclable materials that are collected worldwide.

What has been done since China announced the changes that will impact the system here?

We have been searching for markets, both domestically and internationally, and fine-tuning our processing practices here at home. Internationally, we have representatives overseas in China working with processors, manufacturers, and the Chinese government. We are also developing and searching for new markets across the globe and in the United States to ensure as many materials as possible have a place to go. Working in conjunction with state and local agencies, we have been actively seeking solutions to strengthen and improve our recycling stream since China announced the new policy. One domestic example, among many, has been in our members' investments at their facilities to better sort materials so that the recyclable materials can be diverted efficiently and effectively. Our members are adapting in real-time, adjusting routes and working with our local government partners. Industry-wide, up and down the west coast, we have been focused on addressing this current challenge and ensuring that in the long-term, the recycling system is stronger than ever.

Every city and county may have differences in the system in place, but specific actions that we have taken system-wide include:

- slowed down the conveyor belts that carry potential recyclable goods past people and machines so they can be sorted and re-sorted with a higher level of precision
- hired more people so that there are more eyes and hands picking non-recyclable contaminants out of the recycle stream
- decreased the tolerances of the machines which are automated versions of what the employees are doing so that they reject more non-recyclable contaminants from the recycle stream
- overseas, we are actively seeking new markets for recyclables and continue to work with Chinese partners to secure outlets for the most materials possible under the new restrictions.

How long will this situation last?

At this point, it's unclear, but we have received no indication that the change in China's policies are temporary. The ban on unsorted paper, certain plastics, and other material goes into effect on January 1, 2018. Along with the ban, China also announced stringent new contaminant standards. In recycling, "contaminants" are non-permittable materials that are mixed in with the desirable materials, something that everyone in the recycling system works to prevent, but because of the nature of the solid waste stream, can be very challenging to manage. After January 1, 2018, China will only accept materials with a contaminant rate of 0.3%, something that is virtually unattainable. The impacts of all these policies will be felt before they are implemented, as shipments can take a month or more to reach China. We are actively searching for new markets and solutions, but as everyone realizes, the solid waste stream never stops and recycled materials are already accumulating at various facilities.

Many long-term solutions revolve around the nature of the recycle stream itself – we need to keep materials separated so that the mistakenly-placed hamburger wrapper does not mix with the carefully-sorted newspaper. If you want to help at home, you should re-read the requirements of the recycle program in your community and be diligent about what is included in your recycle bin.

WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT.

If my recycled material is going to a landfill, will I be getting a “refund” toward what I pay for recycling services?

No, system costs will actually increase. The same amount of material is being collected and handled in an environmentally-responsible way. We are recycling as much material as we can, but must do so more slowly in order to meet stringent new quality standards, which increases costs and results in less overall material to market. The situation in most local areas varies, but because disposal costs are based on the weight of items going to a landfill, the costs of the system, including recycling, will actually increase. It is too early at this point to try to predict what the impact on rates could be. But we believe in the strength of the system and we are focused on solutions that minimize the impact of this situation on the environment, the economy and our customers.

What will be the impacts in terms of smell, dust, and the long-term life of the landfill because of this?

Landfills are managed carefully and heavily regulated. Washington has excellent landfill capacity which will last 100 years with only existing facilities. We intend to resolve this situation long before there is a capacity issue at landfills.

Aren't there other places in the U.S. that will use recycled materials?

Yes, there are places in the U.S. and around the world that use recycled materials. Those places already have a stream of recyclables. For example, in Chicago there are outlets for recyclable material and they receive it from the cities, counties, and states nearest to where those outlets are located. Those facilities are at capacity because of what they collect from local programs. We are actively seeking new “customers” for our recycled materials in India, other countries in North America, and throughout Asia. In the meantime, the stream of recycled “product” generated here does not slow down or stop.

Can individual customers store their own recycling until the situation is improved?

No. For purposes of sanitation, public health and safety, and fire safety, we encourage people to stick to their normal routine of putting garbage and recyclables at the curb (or however you normally manage garbage day). If you want to help, please pay attention to the sticker on your co-mingled recycle bin or other information you have from your provider as to what can be recycled. If you are unsure – throw it in the garbage. **WHEN IN DOUBT, THROW IT OUT.**

Recycling significantly reduces our carbon footprint. Will this crisis make global warming worse?

We have one of the strongest recycling systems in the country and we are confident we will find a solution to this situation long before it could ever significantly impact our region’s commitment to reducing our carbon footprint.

Why can't we set aside recycled materials at a new location in Washington until we can find a marketplace to re-use them?

Recyclable materials are considered solid waste and are heavily regulated for a reason. There is not enough available warehousing in the state for safe storage especially since many recyclables are highly flammable. They cannot and should not be “set aside” anywhere that hasn’t been vetted extensively under our regulatory system, which prioritizes public health and safety. The solid waste system is strong and intact and we should dispose of *all* items safely while we seek solutions to the issue at-hand with the recycling market.

Has something like this ever happened before?

No. This is the first time a policy change overseas has had such swift and direct impacts to recycling. But our system is strong, and we are confident we will find solutions in the middle and long-term. In the short-term, it’s crucial that a problem in the international recycling markets does not become multiple problems for public health and safety. The solid waste collection, handling, and processing infrastructure to responsibly handle these materials exists and we will rely on it until solutions can be put in place.

What is the federal government’s position on this situation? Should I contact my Senator or Representative?

In collaboration with our colleagues on the national stage, those of us at the state level have been in contact with federal stakeholders and internationally with the World Trade Organization. We are working hard to share information and to determine the best ways to protect our recycling system while resetting the market. An analogy is flying a plane while repairing it! What we would benefit from most is time, but nothing is affecting how committed we are to getting back on track.