

The U.S. Recycling Crisis and What We Can Do About It

Around 1992, US started sending their least valuable “recyclables” to China. China was desperate for raw materials. These bales of mixed paper and plastic were processed in China under a lack of pollution laws. We hadn’t believed that China would carry out their 2013 threat to ban these contaminated bales of recyclables. But in 2017, U.S. and European dirty recyclables were banned and started piling up at ports and warehouses. This ban created chaos in U.S. communities.

Actually, it was a crisis of our own making. We weren’t investing in infrastructure to do a better job of sorting recyclables. We were just sending the poorly sorted recyclables to China. The cost of recycling here soared. Some communities started sending recyclables to landfills, and others sent them to be incinerated at waste-to-energy plants. Some started to limit the types of recyclables they would pick up, and others ended curbside programs all together.

There is a “Silver Lining”. Five paper mills are retooling for recycling paper in south-central U.S. The paper recycling industry is coming back, but it will be several years before it is stable. The recycled plastics industry is working to reduce contamination. Some facilities are using optic scanners that help to separate plastics. The recycling operations that are doing well are those that catered all along to domestic markets that wanted clean, high-quality plastics and paper.

So how can we help with this recycling crisis?

We can stop putting contaminated recyclable materials in the recycling bin. We can also stop putting in unrecyclable junk: plastic bags, plastic wrap, soda straws in the bin.

Use the IL EPA Interactive Curbside Bin Recycling Guide and other resources to reduce contamination:

- **Illinois EPA Interactive Curbside Bin Recycling Guide**
www.dataservices.epa.illinois.gov/recycle/curbside-bin-recycling-guide.html
- **Updated McHenry County Green Guide and www.mchenry.edu/green and the A to Z Guide for many more items**

Other ways to increase recycling:

1. Encourage manufacturers to voluntarily ensure that new packages and containers are made of recyclable material.
2. Ten states have container deposit laws requiring refundable deposits on single-use beverage containers (plastic, glass and metal). Support deposit laws. Illinois is one of six other states considering deposit laws.
3. **Of course, reducing and reusing is the best.**
4. In Illinois, there are two plastic and paper bag bills in the legislature. Woodstock just passed a tax on plastic bags, and many restaurants in McHenry County and throughout the country only provide customers with straws if requested. A carpet recycling bill is also in Illinois legislature.
5. **Composting your food scraps and landscape waste.**
Compost at your home either on the garden or in a compost bin. Or use a composting facility. To make composted materials a viable product, more markets are needed (DOT did a pilot project in McHenry). Midwest Recycling Organics just outside McHenry has compost product for sale at selected midwestern Whole Foods Markets and at their site.

6. How can we help?

Purchase products made from recycled materials. Look on product labels: Made from recycled content. Check websites like www.earth911.com.

Why Recycling and Waste Reduction Matter

Recycling can minimize the rate of global climate change by reducing the extraction of raw materials from the earth and the amount of fossil fuel burnt in the manufacturing process. Waste prevention is even more effective. Like recycling, it diminishes the need for raw materials, saves energy and fossil fuels, and diverts materials away from landfills and incinerators.

What You Can Do to Reduce Household Waste

- When shopping, purchase in bulk and use reusable containers whenever possible.
- Take reusable cloth or canvas grocery and produce bags to the store.
- Avoid single-use containers. When that isn't possible, try to buy food packaged in paper, cardboard or glass.
- Carry reusable water bottles, takeout containers, and straws with you when you're on the go.
- Make and grow as much of your own food and purchase as much locally grown food as possible.
- Consider using cloth diapers.
- Compost as much of your food waste as possible.
- Buy lightly used products rather than new. Donate anything you no longer need that is still in working condition.

Resources:

- Earth911.com**
- You Can't Recycle Garbage* article in July-Aug. 2019 Sierra Club magazine
- Oct. 2, 2019, presentation by Peter Adrian, Recycling Director, Solid Waste Agency of Lake County
- Updated McHenry County Green Guide and www.mchenry.edu/green
- IL EPA Interactive Curbside Bin Recycling Guide**
www.dataservices.epa.illinois.gov/recycle/curbside-bin-recycling-guide.html