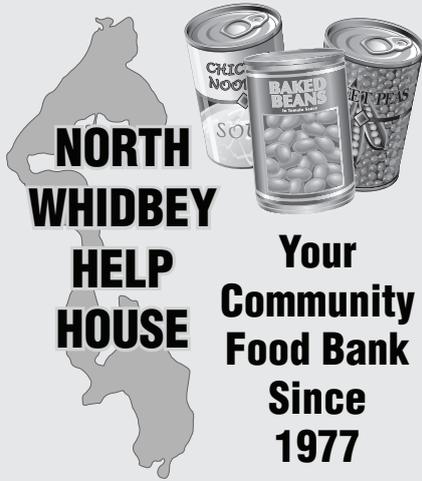


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Make a Difference

By Sara Bergquist
Waste Wise Program Educator, WSU Extension Island County

WHAT'S UP WITH RECYCLING AND HOW YOU MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Recycling - this seems like it would be easy but, in reality, it can be a little complicated. You can recycle some things in some areas, but not in others. Some places you have to sort your recycling yourself but in other places it all goes into the same bin. Some towns go by numbers, while others go by shape. What is going on?

What's happened in recycling?

There are several things that impact recycling do's and don'ts, but this year it boils down to two things: (1) our recycled commodities market and (2) contamination (i.e. things going into recycling that should not). Specifically, contamination has resulted in a loss of market for the majority of our recycled material.

The Process

We recycle in two basic ways. Some of us separate our recyclable items by material into the appropriate bin at a recycle park. This is known as "source separation." Some of us have an easier job in that we have curbside pickup where we place all of our recyclables in one container. This is known as "single stream" recycling. Our container - along with many others - goes to a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) where the paper is separated from the aluminum and so on. Whether self-sorted or single stream, eventually all of this material is compressed into bales of one commodity or another. Examples include mixed paper, aluminum, and cardboard. These commodities become material for global manufacturing industries.

The majority of these materials, until recently, were shipped to China, where they were used in the manufacturing of new products. Reusing these materials lessens the need for virgin natural resources, decreases the environmental costs of manufacturing, and keeps them out of the landfill. The problem was we (and many other countries) were sending over bales of contaminated products. The bales did not contain the single items they were supposed to. For example, the paper or plastic bales might have had glass shards or tin buried within the bale. It had to be resorted and some of it had to be thrown away once it reached China, because contaminated bales do not provide good material to use in new products.

Two quick questions arise: Why are these bales of recycled materials contaminated? What happened to the China market?

Contamination

Contamination in recycling is a serious issue which causes three major problems: (1) it increases inefficiency at sorting facilities, (2) lowers the value of the product, and (3) it leads to greater waste. How much of a problem is this? One out of every four pounds of material put into the recycle bin shouldn't be there. Additionally, the stuff that should be in the bin can be ruined by stuff that shouldn't be. Most of the country uses single stream recycling. Everything goes into the same bin. The "almost empty" milk jug goes in. The newspapers go in. The glass bottles go in. The milk gets on the paper, causing mold to develop. The bottles break and shards of glass get on everything. These problems are compounded by single stream recycling, but they also happen with source separation. Additionally, people are confused about what to recycle or they want to recycle things that are not recyclable. Deli trays, stuffed animals, and dirty diapers (yes) end up in recycle. All of this material goes to the MRF, where technology and many hands do their very best to sort it out. The difficulty is the technology is not advanced enough, as of yet, to do a perfect job. All of this results in increased contamination. This brings us to our second question - that of the recycling market in China.

China

The West Coast has relied heavily on China as our major market for recycled commodities. Shipping containers that bring goods to the West Coast and would otherwise go back empty provided an opportunity to be filled with recyclables. Because of this, the West Coast has developed limited infrastructure for using recycled material. China, until recently, accepted over 50-percent of the world's mixed paper and plastic. With these materials came trash and heavy impacts to the environment and human health. China has been working on the problem for several years and in 2017 it implemented extensive restrictions. This initiative, called "National Sword," established a new, very limited list of accepted items.

Thus, many items we previously recycled now have no China market. Additionally, the acceptable level of contamination for recyclables China does still take decreased to just 0.5-percent! Considering our average level of contamination is approximately 25-percent, this is a change our systems are not currently capable of achieving. As a result, much of this recycling has stacked up as we work to find new markets and establish infrastructure regionally.

What's our response?

The recycling industry is tackling this challenge with a three-pronged approach. It is working to improve sorting technology. It is encouraging the development of new markets, both in new uses for recycled materials and in increasing other markets locally and globally. Finally, it is reaching out to the public with educational campaigns to reduce contamination.

How can I make a difference?

The biggest way you can make a difference is to recycle right by avoiding contamination. We contaminate by trying to recycle things that aren't recyclable or aren't empty, clean, and dry. We want to recycle everything. This is wishful recycling or "wish-cycling." We look at the bottom and see the triangle arrow and assume it can be recycled. We are not sure so we toss it in the recycle bin, thinking someone will take it out if it doesn't belong there. This seems helpful, but in fact it does more harm than good. Wish-cycling can cause contamination resulting in an entire bale of recyclable materials being thrown out. The same goes for tossing in dirty jars, wet paper, or used pizza boxes, all of which become contamination.

How we're adapting on Whidbey

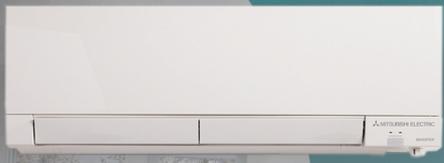
In Island County, beginning Saturday, there will be a change in which plastics are acceptable as recyclables. All non-plastic item rules (i.e. cardboard, mixed paper, food tins, etc.) will remain unchanged. Accepted plastic items must fill two requirements: first, they must have the correct shape and second, they must have the right number in the recycle symbol on the bottom. The shape must be a bottle, tub, jug or jar. The number must be 1 or 2. That is for plastic, only #1 or #2 bottles, tubs, jugs, and jars will be accepted for recycling. Any other plastics will not be accepted and are considered contamination. Additionally, it is very important all recyclable items (plastic and otherwise) be empty, clean, and dry. With these new changes beginning Saturday, we should eliminate a great deal of the wish-cycling that occurs, as we no longer have to remember if clamshells or deli trays are acceptable (which they are not). For plastics, simply put: #1 and #2 plastic bottles, tubs, jugs, and jars are recyclable. Everything (plastic, metal, aluminum, paper, etc.) must be empty, clean, and dry. Oh, and no caps or lids, please.

The long view

When you are standing at the recycle bin wondering why you can't recycle something, these changes may not seem like a good thing. However, there are several pieces of good news. First, consider that China is working hard to clean up its environment. To see what it is working to fix, consider watching the film, "Plastic China." Second, the items that are acceptable account for the greatest majority of what we recycle. By reducing our wish-cycling and sticking to empty, clean, and dry we are actually recycling more as less is being thrown out due to contamination. Third, these restrictions in the Chinese market (and other foreign importers of recyclables) require us to develop creative markets and uses for our own materials, as well as reconsider what we use for packaging. Finally, although we all want to be able to recycle more, the greatest impact we can have on our environment is to consider more carefully what we buy. Avoiding the purchase of single use plastic by choosing reusable items is a great step. So, while we will be limited for a while in what we can recycle, there are also many positives. In the meantime, remember the following mantra: **EMPTY, CLEAN, and DRY for all and #1 and #2 bottles, tubs, jugs, and jars for plastics.** It is easier than ever to recycle right and you can help make a difference on Whidbey by doing so!

If you are interested in learning more about how to reduce our waste footprint or about sustainable living, contact Waste Wise at WSU Extension Island County. Email ic.wastewise@wsu.edu or call 360-639-6062.

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