

Recycling is Broken



One of the more interesting articles I read this week was called “Recycling Is Broken.” Here were some of its highlights in case you do not want to read the whole article:

- US Recyclers process about 61 million metric tons of material a year. A significant portion of that was sold to China. However, this changed in January of 2018 when China banned the import of 24 recycled materials and put stricter purity requirements on others. This was in part to combat their country’s pollution problem.
- The changes in China’s policy dropped the price of many commodities dramatically (e.g., from \$100 to \$3 for a ton of mixed paper).
- The average US recyclable load is about 25% contaminated. China’s new 0.5% maximum contamination threshold meant US recyclers needed to hire more people and buy more equipment to process material for resale.
- The costs of recycling have soared for US cities. The city of Philadelphia was earning \$67 per ton for certain recycled materials in 2012. By January 2018, Philly was paying its contractor, Republic Services, \$20 a ton to continue taking recycling. By the summer, that figure had jumped to \$40 a ton. When the city started trying to renegotiate its contract, which expired in September, Republic Services asked for \$170 a ton to keep recycling. This was not economically viable.
- There is no one solution, but recycling programs are trying to do a better job educating consumers on what is truly recyclable, how to clean your containers before putting them in the bin, reducing waste in the first place, and finding new buyers (e.g., manufacturers) for recycled materials.

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