

## Lewis Clark Recyclers Implements Major Changes to Recycling Efforts

It is our distinct pleasure to provide the Lewis Clark Valley with waste-reducing recycling services and document destruction. Since 1988, we have been working diligently to make our area cleaner and more sustainable, both for the benefit of our friends and neighbors, as well as the world at large. Unfortunately, market forces well beyond our control are forcing us to make significant changes to our services in order for us to continue our mission and maintain our workforce. Please know that we are doing everything possible within these new constraints.

The information below outlines the current issues we are facing with regard to plastics recycling. We hope you find it illuminating, and we look forward to working together to find new and different ways to make our region and our world a healthier place to live.

### Plastics Recycling

#### **Q: What changes are coming?**

A: The discontinuation of post-consumer plastic collection.

#### **Q: Why are these changes happening?**

A: Due to China's implementation of their "Green Fence"<sup>1</sup> and "National Sword"<sup>2</sup> policies, they will no longer accept a vast array of products for recycling.<sup>3</sup> Post-consumer plastic is just one category.

#### **Q: Why did China implement these policies?**

A: Four reasons are really driving these policies:

1. Contamination within the imported product. With the advent of the "Single Stream"<sup>4</sup> recycling method, previously reclaimable plastics are mixed with other products and, in many instances, outright waste. This contamination can, and does, include food residue, paper, wood and other fibers, non-recyclable plastic (Styrofoam, PVC), human and animal waste, bio-hazard materials, chemical waste, etc.
2. The cost of labor for sorting the incoming material has increased, while the amount and quality of the reclaimable product has declined. The cost of disposing of the contaminants that are removed from the waste stream further reduces the profit margin. The pollution that has occurred due to the improper and unregulated disposal of the contaminants has seriously impacted environmental quality not only regionally, but globally. That pollution leads to reason number 3.
3. China has a pollution crisis. Air and water quality has become so degraded as to be unlivable. China has made the commitment to clean up its country. Waste stream processing is not the only area they are targeting. Commercial and artisanal coal mining is a major source of pollution. China has terminated production at over 1000 coal mining operations in the past four years.
4. Economic growth. China is rapidly becoming a consumer society. The growing Chinese middleclass is already generating such a large amount of recyclable materials that China is not only suspending importation of recyclables, they are looking to export theirs to other countries.

#### **Q: What impact does this have for recyclers?**

A: If no market develops for plastics and segregated collection ceases, there will be no economic reason to recycle. Secondary markets for all post-consumer recyclables have been hard-hit. The price for post-consumer plastics sits at zero! Mixed paper has gone from \$100.00 per ton a year ago to \$25.00. Recyclers and sorting facilities may be forced out of business, as many have already



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been.  
Under China's National Sword program, even imports of clean, sorted post-consumer plastics are banned. Prior to the (January 2018) implementation of China's new program, 11 million metric tons of baled post-consumer paper and plastics were imported to China annually. Today, domestic markets are unable to consume this overabundance, leaving warehouses full of homeless single-stream collected post-consumer secondary commodities. With supplies of post-consumer recyclables far beyond domestic and other off-shore industrial consumption rates, market prices are now suppressed by as much as 600 percent with little hope of edging back anytime in the near future.

Under the many facets of China's curtailment of post-consumer recyclable material, a new day has dawned for all that took for granted its endless consumption of America's trash. Collectors are now forced to pay hundreds of dollars per ton to ship their material to large sorting facilities in faraway places in hopes some percentage is actually used once again. For those unable to afford to ship their collected materials, the only option to landfill collections until viable markets return to stable conditions.

The few remaining source-separated collection programs are a better fit for domestic markets because of cleanliness, but those programs are still feeling the financial challenges of greatly suppressed markets. Many, if not all such programs are faced with reducing what recyclables are collected to minimize associated sortation and landfill costs to remain viable amidst worsening market conditions.

**Q: What specific impact does this have for Lewis Clark Recyclers Inc. (LCRI) and its clients?**

A. LCRI will continue to work with commercial, industrial and community clientele to support viable recycling interests as we move forward. LCRI cannot continue to subsidize or ask its clients to subsidize collection of post-consumer plastics only to landfill them as non-desirable in secondary markets.

B. LCRI will continue to collect and recycle the paper, cardboard and tin/aluminum products under the existing community programs.

C. LCRI service rate structuring and educational measures will undergo close scrutiny by its administration team which may ultimately result in adjustments in costs and market-share considerations.

D. With the suspension of plastics collection, our community partners will see an increase in tonnage sent to the landfill as well as directly related disposal costs.

**GENERAL INSIGHTFULNESS**

**Q: What impact does this have for municipalities?**

A. For cities without their own landfill, disposal fees will increase dramatically. Some municipalities are spending millions to revamp their current collection system, while other have already abandoned their programs completely. And, oddly, some are implementing new Single Stream programs.

For cities with their own landfill, these facilities will quickly reach maximum capacity. No revenue will be generated from the sale of recyclables. The threat of ground water and other types of contamination will increase.

**Q: What impact does this have for the public?**

A. If plastics and other recyclables are going to be land-filled, collection may actually be simplified. "One bin for everything." Costs for collection, however, will likely increase as will the public's personal landfill use-cost due to lack of landfill capacity and a hike in tipping fee rates. No real recycling will take place, and there may very well be hidden, long-term costs.

**Q. What impact does this have on the environment?**

A. Land-filling of anything that does not bio-degrade is not a sound policy. Plastic degrades extremely slow. Additionally, decomposing plastic products are known to emit methane and other greenhouse gases.

There is always a portion of waste that is wantonly discarded. Whether small amounts from individuals or large amounts from unscrupulous haulers trying to avoid tipping fees. If these recyclables are viewed by the public as waste, they will be discarded as such and some percentage will enter directly into the environment.



**Q: What can be done to mitigate the impact of land-filling and pollution?**

A: Land-filling and even exporting should not be considered long-term solutions. Various programs around the world exist that are using waste-to-energy incineration, low temperature pyrolysis to turn plastic into diesel fuel, and biological and chemical disintegration methods. Exporting to other countries, usually third world countries, results in improper disposal of the majority tonnage of material. This is often pushed into sea or burned in open fires. Rampant and chronic environmental and social health problems are the end result.

Lessening the demand will help. Far too many consumer items are needlessly over-packaged. Single-use plastics such as shopping bags, cups/containers, drinking straws, packaging, eating utensils, and the like, are very convenient, but are incredibly irresponsible. There are better alternatives. Many of these items have been banned in various countries but the effort seems hit or miss. No comprehensive approach to the problem is being taken by any one country. Realistically, there needs to be a global consensus and a co-operative effort.

- Manufactures will only reduce the use of plastic if they feel real pressure from the consuming public.
- The public needs to take responsibility and apply that pressure while reducing their use of plastics. Especially, single use plastics.
- More effort is needed at the academic/scientific level to research new processes and create new technologies to combat this dilemma.

Sorting is the key to any viable type of recycling. Acceptable sorting at the source (the consumer) is essential. If the consumer is allowed to mix different types of recyclables, or mix recyclables with trash, cost-efficient sorting cannot be accomplished. Not by the recycling agent or foreign unskilled labor. If plastics are to be recycled at all, the waste stream must be clean. Single Stream collection is not the answer.

Adequate sorting has its drawbacks. The need of multiple containers (glass, cardboard, tin/aluminum, newsprint, yard waste and trash) for each household conflicts with the amount of available space and, sadly, consumers don't like to sort.

In conclusion, you can see that there is no easy solution before us with regard to plastics recycling. Rest assured that we are using all available resources at our disposal to devise a long-term solution to this issue, but in doing so, we must suspend this service in order to continue to provide our community with the rest of the vital, eco-conscious services you are accustomed to. We appreciate your understanding and thank you for your partnership in building a cleaner, more sustainable planet.

*To view the sources used in this article, please visit our website at [lcri.net](http://lcri.net).*

*For more information or questions, please call us at 208-746-1187.*

**REDUCE. REUSE. RECYCLE.**

## LCRI Citations

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