



How China has Affected Recycling in Palm Beach County

I recently read with much interest an article written by Willie Puz, Director of Public Affairs and Recycling for the [Solid Waste Authority of Palm Beach County](#) (SWA) regarding the changes with recyclables over the last several years.

The SWA received many calls and emails about news stories on the state of recycling and how China has impacted recycling here in [Palm Beach County](#) (PBC). This prompted a thorough, informative response with information I wanted to share. If you have any questions about recycling in PBC, or would like to tour the facilities first hand, please contact Willie at 561-640-8914 or via email at wpuz@swa.org.

While we are receiving less revenue due to the down recycling market, your local government is still benefitting by revenue because our residents are doing their part - putting the correct items in blue and yellow recycling bins. Dual stream (two bin) recycling is still alive in PBC so, please, keep "[Recycling Right!](#)" More importantly, we are helping the earth and extending the life of our landfill.

There is no doubt that the China ban has had a major negative impact on the recycling industry worldwide and has caused unprecedented problems, however, the impact to our system has been much less than the majority of counties in the state. You can [read the full response from the SWA](#) by visiting their website at www.swa.org and clicking the "How China is impacting recycling in PBC" slideshow graphic.

Timeline of Events:

- 2013 - China implements **Operation Green Fence**, a policy where incoming loads of scrap material were intensively inspected
- 2017 - China announces plans for additional changes to its policies to prohibit the entry of foreign waste, improve environmental conditions and reduce the unlawful disposal of waste from both domestic and foreign sources. The goal was to bring about more stringent regulations and better enforcement against illegal commerce conducted by unlicensed brokers, traders and others, who combine municipal solid waste (regular garbage) with paper and/or plastic destined for China
- January 2018, China bans the import of 23 different types of wastes. The two types of banned imported wastes that specifically impacted the recycling market were mixed paper and mixed plastics
- March 2018, China imposes a contamination level of 0.5% for incoming recyclable materials

These new acceptable contamination levels made it even harder to meet specifications particularly in other areas of the US where the recycling trend has been toward single stream recycling in which all recyclables are placed in one large cart. Such facilities around the country most likely do not have a waste to energy option resulting in having to landfill their recyclables. This is where many of the most alarming news stories came from. Fortunately, our two bin system reduces our contamination level to about 8%-9%. While it is still a challenge to meet the new specification, as a dual stream system, our material is preferred.

As the uncertainty of the market hit in January 2018, the SWA has explored all options to sell our commodities both domestically and internationally. Additionally, the SWA had to stockpile mixed plastics and find alternative methods of disposing of paper. While we did not landfill any recycled material, we made a decision to recover the energy and we sent a small number of bales of mixed plastic and bales of mixed paper to our [Renewable Energy Facility 2](#) to maintain a safe inventory level at the [Recovered Materials Processing Facility](#). When our storage space gets full and there are safety concerns, we have again diverted a small amount of recyclable material to our waste to energy facility where it is converted into electricity and sold to [Florida Power & Light](#). We are fortunate that the waste to energy facilities give us the opportunity to recover the energy from this material and generate revenue.

As always, I invite your comments on any issue of interest to you. As your Commissioner, I am here to help you. You may write me at 301 N. Olive Ave., West Palm Beach, 33401 or at MBerger@pbcgov.org. You can call me or my staff at 276-1310 or toll free at 877-930-2205. Please visit me on the Web at www.pbcgov.com/d5.