

Waste Management Position on Plastic Exports

October 2019

BACKGROUND

In 2013 China implemented Operation Green Fence, a strategic effort focused on inspections at its ports which restricted the flow of recyclables into the country. WM's operations were affected, underscoring our dependence on China and the need to increasingly diversify our market options.

Shortly thereafter, we expanded our global presence and strengthened our domestic mill alliances for both paper and plastic. By the end of 2017, WM was marketing 63% of all its recyclables (paper and plastic) to domestic markets and exporting relatively small amounts of plastic outside of North America.

With the 2017 announcement of China's new import restrictions banning imports of mixed plastic and mixed paper (National Sword), WM's efforts to diversify its end markets were demonstrated to be prudent. In 2019 WM has sold 77% of its recyclables (paper and plastic) to domestic markets. No plastics collected on WM's residential routes and processed in Waste Management single stream material recovery facilities are sent outside of North America. Where there is no market we are disposing of this material responsibly.

THE GLOBAL PLASTIC PROBLEM AND MARINE DEBRIS

In 2018 media attention increased on the issue of plastic waste in the environment. The issue of marine debris began to draw heightened scrutiny on the use of plastics, and the end-of-life solutions for this material. Plastics are ubiquitous, and the use of plastics packaging has grown exponentially across the globe, yet end-of-life options for managing this material have proven inadequate. In fact, the very attributes that make plastic so useful also make it a problem at end-of-life. Plastics do not degrade and can remain in the environment (including in landfills) for decades. When plastic is not managed properly, it can end up in rivers and streams, and ultimately the ocean.

Studies indicate that eighty percent of the world's marine debris is land-generated, with 50% coming from four countries – China, the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. With our extensive collection, recycling and disposal infrastructure, the U.S. is twentieth on the list of contributors. In spite of these investments, however, hundreds of tons of litter finds its way onto U.S. beaches and into U.S. waterways each year, contributing to the global marine debris problem.

With China's ban on imports, plastic from across the globe began to move to a variety of countries that are not well equipped to handle the material, furthering the likelihood of more plastics entering rivers, waterways and oceans. One by one, these countries have begun to restrict the importation of scrap plastics for recycling as the volumes imported have exceeded their processing capacity.

WASTE MANAGEMENT'S POSITION ON PLASTIC

In response to concerns about plastic in the environment, Waste Management is not shipping plastics collected on its residential recycling routes and processed in its single stream material recovery facilities to locations outside North America. The company is working to help establish responsible domestic markets for recycling and beneficial use of these materials. Waste Management is an advocate for proper management of materials through end of life.

