Has China Killed Recycling?

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The American/Chinese Recycling Relationship: How We Got Here

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As single stream recycling expands, so does contamination.

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- 2013 – The “Green Fence” goes up.

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The American/Chinese Recycling Relationship: How We Got Here

Further Chinese environmental initiatives:

2017 – National Sword

2018 – Blue Sky

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2017/2018: A Timeline

China signals it may significantly reduce categories of recyclable materials it imports.

Contamination standard of 0.5% goes into effect.

Total Chinese ban on imported scrap materials proposed to take effect in 2020 or earlier.

2017: April July Fall Early 2018 March May June July

China confirms its intent to ban 24 categories of solid waste (including many plastics) through a filing with the WTO.

Haulers and material recovery facilities (MRFs) start feeling the effects.

China suspends all scrap imports from the U.S. for one month.

Scrap import restrictions ripple across SE Asia.

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What's Motivating China

- Force an industry-wide shift to higher-quality materials.
- Bolster domestic Chinese markets
- Consolidation of domestic recycling processors into "Eco-Parks" / better domestic regulation

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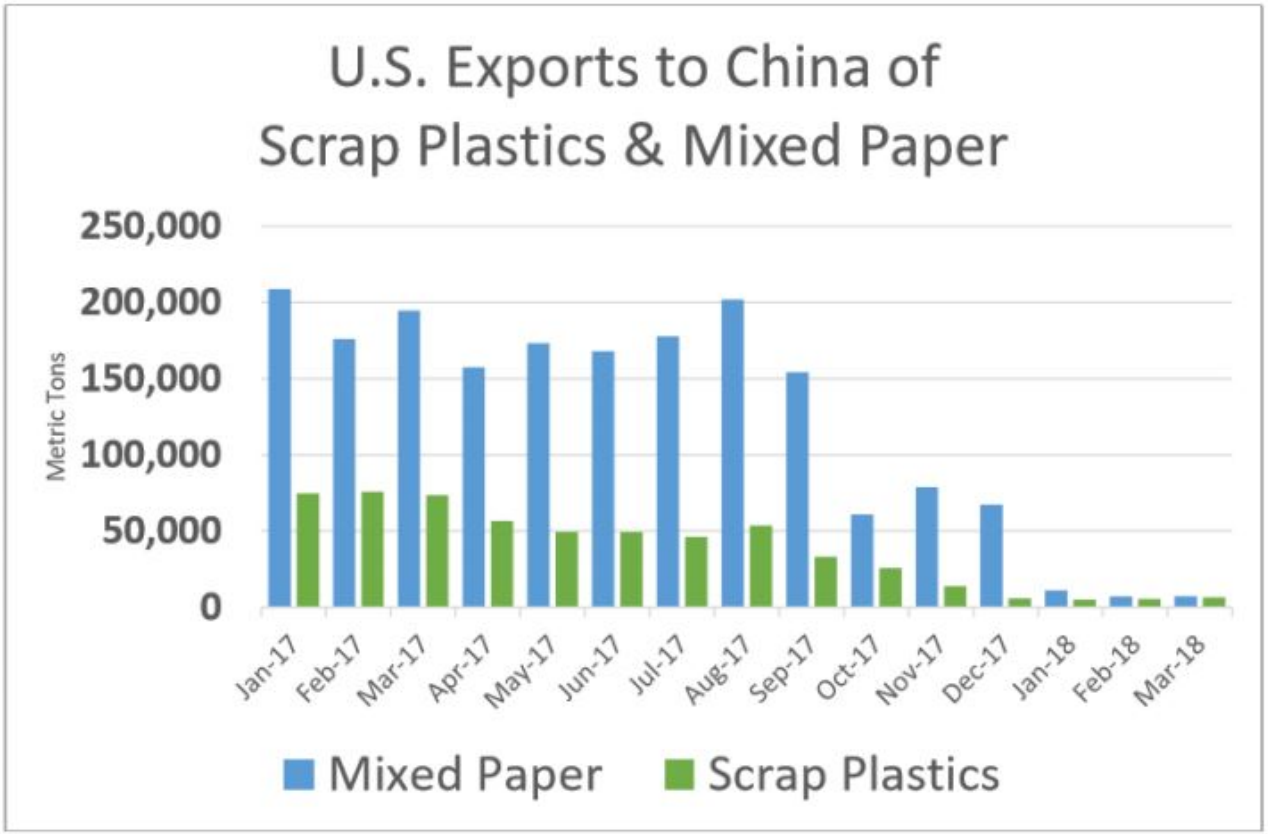
The Short-Term Fallout



Data from U.S. Census Bureau/U.S. International Trade Commission courtesy of ISRI

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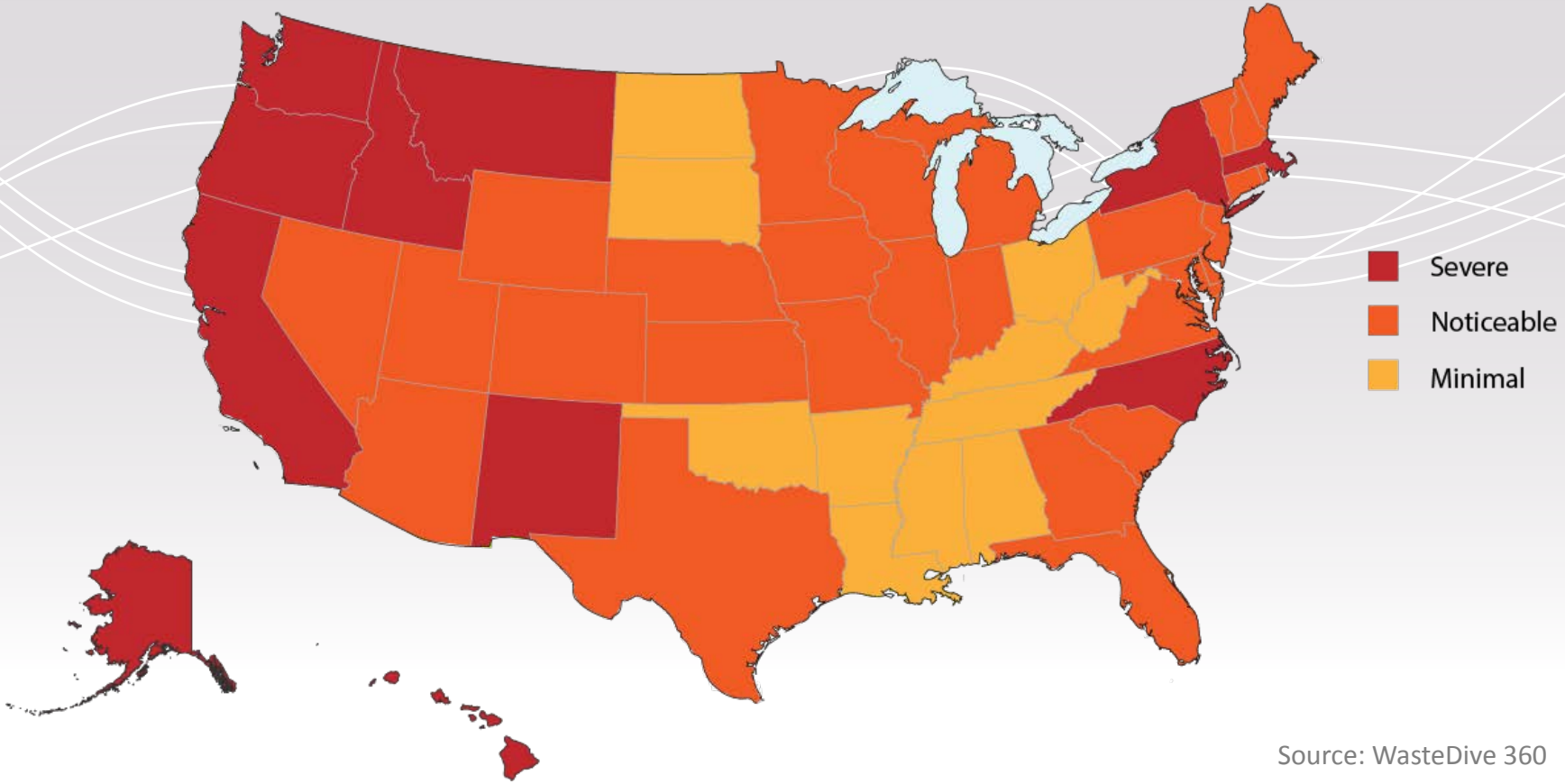
The Short-Term Fallout

- Severely depressed markets for certain recyclables.
- Recyclable materials being warehoused or going to landfill.
- Recycling processors scrambling to adapt.
- Municipalities reconsidering recycling programs or raising fees.
- China facing shortages causing manufacturer downtime.

Impacts Across the U.S. Vary Regionally

Effects of China's New Environmental Regulations



Source: WasteDive 360

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Impact on Pennsylvania

- Lancaster County – will be increasing recycling fees for residents; commercial clients of Penn Waste (regional recycling processor) already seeing increased fees. (Source: LancasterOnline)
- Lancaster region – Penn Waste has announced new list of accepted materials, which excludes mixed paper and certain plastics. (Source: PennWaste)
- Philadelphia – now pays $38/ton to dispose of recyclables, up from $4/ton last year. (Source: Philadelphia Inquirer)
- Materials accepted at county drop-off sites are being cut back throughout the state; some drop-off programs are being suspended. (Sources: The Meadville Tribune, GoErie.com, The Pocono Record, New Castle News, Gant News)
- Mt. Lebanon – residents will not be able to recycle glass and certain types of plastics beginning in 2019. (Source: South Hills Community News)

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Silver Linings

The situation offers us an opportunity to rethink the American waste stream.

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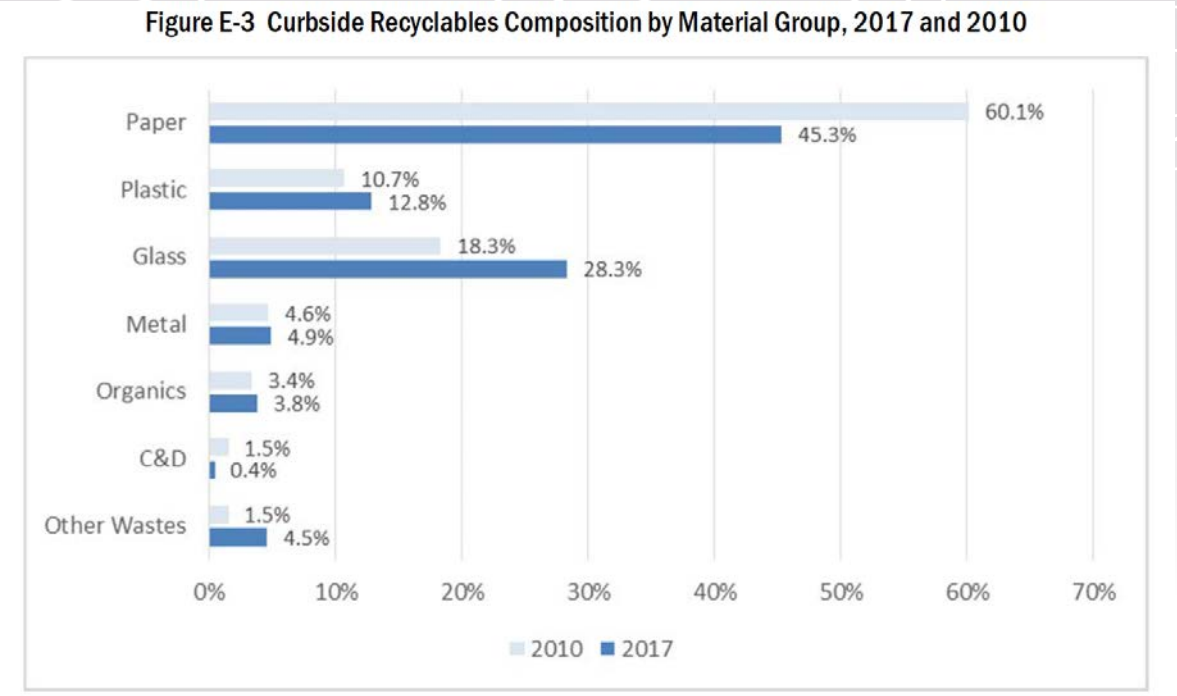
Silver Linings

- Improve U.S. recycling infrastructure; clean up the recycling stream.



Source: Philadelphia Streets Department

Silver Linings

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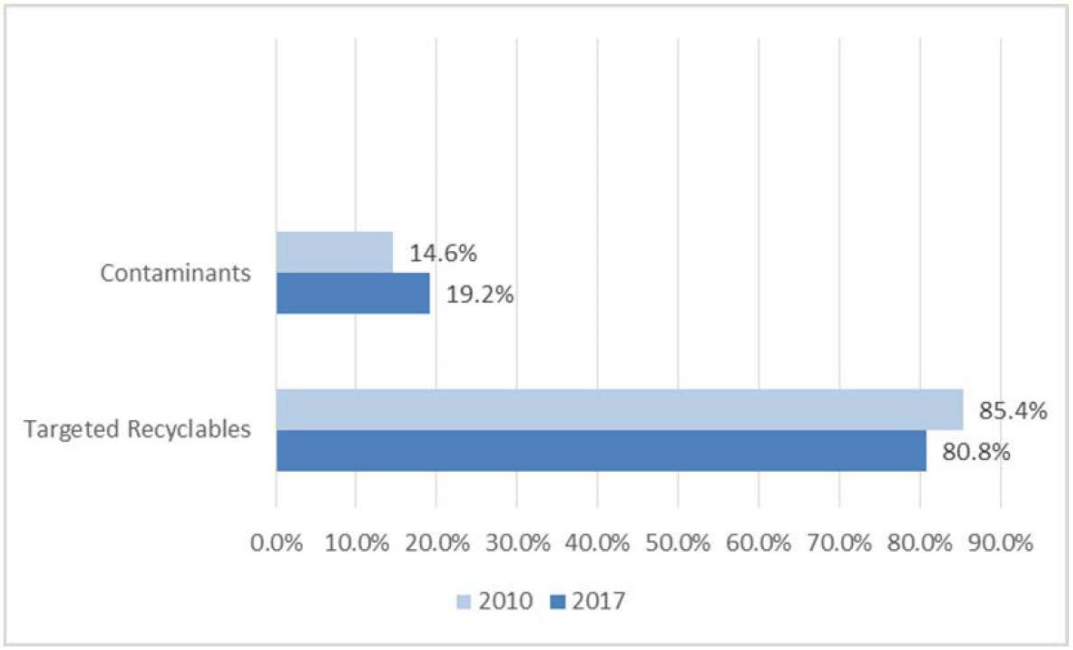
Figure E-6 Recoverability of Residential Recyclables, Curbside Recyclables, 2017 and 2010

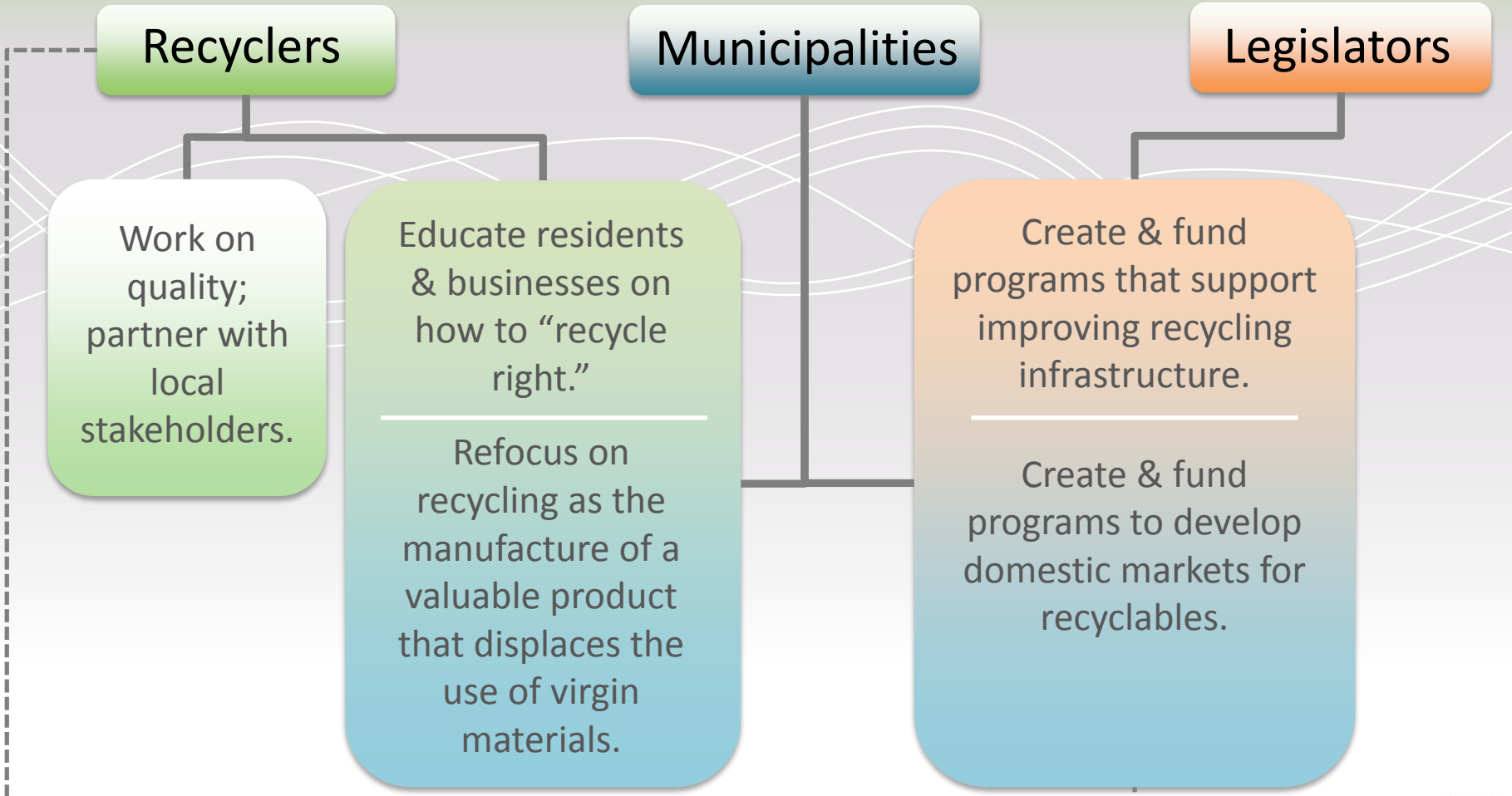


Source: Philadelphia Streets Department

Silver Linings

- Bolster domestic demand for recycled feedstock.
- Provide incentive to innovate.

Seizing Opportunities



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Recycling: Is It Still Worth It?

The short answer: YES!

Why?

- Markets will adapt.
- We can build the recycling system of the future.

"The American people love to recycle, and the market will find a way." – Darrell Smith, National Waste and Recycling Association

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What You Can Do

- Keep contaminants out of the recycling stream.
- Rinse your recyclables.
- Know what's recyclable – no wishcycling!
- Reduce your consumption of plastics.

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What You Can Do

Contact your elected officials and tell them:

- You support recycling.
- You want them to support legislation that provides funding for improving recycling infrastructure, education and programs.
- You want them to support & fund programs to help create demand for recycled content domestically.

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Further Resources

- Comprehensive (and regularly updated) timeline of China's actions and their impact:
  - https://resource-recycling.com/recycling/2018/02/13/green-fence-red-alert-china-timeline/
- Regularly updated list of state-by-state impacts:
  - https://www.wastedive.com/news/what-chinese-import-policies-mean-for-all-50-states/510751/

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Thank you!

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