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Solid Waste Management Department

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Recycling's Stronger Future

You may have heard recycling is in trouble, but it is actually changing for the better. Before 2018, China was the convenient outlet for unsorted, low value classes of recyclables that domestic markets did not accept. Last January, China restricted the amount of lower quality recyclables that the country would import. Chinese markets would no longer accept foreign bales of unprocessed plastics and mixed paper, and any processed paper and plastic bales must not exceed 0.5 percent contamination.

This policy, known as the National Sword, has not ruined recycling in America. It has illuminated some problems in the industry that are now being addressed: high contamination rates and an unsustainable reliance on foreign recycling markets.

Material recovery facilities (MRFs), which sort out different categories of recyclables into bales, are now focusing on improving material quality and selling recyclables in America. MRFs have been swamped with high contamination, or non-recyclables, in the recycling mix. The more contaminants MRFs need to comb out, the costlier their operations. The National Sword policy coupled with high contamination rates caused reduced revenue from material sales and increased costs from contamination management.

Single-stream recycling, in which residential recyclables are collected together, has been an effective tool in boosting participation and recovered tonnage. However, MRFs are not designed to separate trash from recyclable materials. They are designed to separate recyclables into commodities, and they function best when they only handle quality recyclable materials that have domestic buyers. Contamination worsens when well-meaning residents put non-recyclable items in their recycling cart (wish-cycling) because they were not provided clear education.

Single-stream recycling when paired with direct, consistent and sustained education is the most effective way to recover the most recyclable material and avoid contamination.

Despite the challenges, the United States and North Carolina, in particular, have strong domestic recycling markets for quality material. Last year, North Carolina residents recycled more than 1.5 million tons of material. Material processors, manufacturers and paper mills use thousands of tons of recovered glass, aluminum, steel, paper and plastic every day. North Carolina recyclers are dependent on residential collection programs to supply the material needed to manufacture products and support the 16,300 private sector jobs in the state's 674 recycling businesses.

The state of NC is actively working to improve outcomes on both sides of the recycling bin: promoting better messaging to be "cart smart" and supporting local markets to put those materials back to beneficial use. The state has developed a back-to-basics public education campaign, *Recycle Right NC*, to help communities inform their residents to put only those recyclable items that MRFs can manage in their carts. Single-stream recycling programs that emphasize the collection of cans,

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bottles, cardboard and paper most efficiently recover the highest tonnages. Items like textiles and plastic bags, while reusable and recyclable when managed separately, cannot be recovered when mixed together with other materials in curbside recycling.

To ease market stress in the short-term, communities can educate residents to recycle only those materials that truly belong in recycling containers. In the long-term, recycling markets will improve as contamination is reduced and use of recycled content increases. Americans are expecting more sustainable practices and manufacturers are listening. Domestic manufacturers are increasing the amount of recycled content in products; recyclers are investing in new and upgraded facilities; and North Carolina is building a more resilient recycling marketplace that spurs local economic growth and conserves our natural resources. North Carolinians love to recycle, and with the right information, doing so will be easier than ever.

Now is the time to reinvigorate our outreach about recycling and focus on recovering the quality material that can be used in American markets. Using regional recycling buyers means more environmental and economic benefits for NC, but requires that recyclables be better sorted. That is where we all can help, with every correct item we put in the bin!