
NEWS > BUSINESS

'When in doubt, throw it out.'

A struggling market spurs drive for better recycling.

By **NATALIE RADEMACHER** | nrademacher@pioneerpress.com |

PUBLISHED: December 8, 2019 at 5:17 a.m. | UPDATED: December 9, 2019 at 3:40 p.m.

As Camille Morse Nicholson stands over the recycling bin in her kitchen, she pauses. The St. Paul woman is unsure if the plastic tofu container in her hand is recyclable.

Despite recycling for most of her life, Nicholson still has questions about what belongs in the blue bin. Can her tofu container be recycled?

Recycling can be confusing to consumers. Different cities often have different rules. Labels on packaging are sometimes unclear. This leads to trash winding up in the recycling stream, affecting its quality.

With the recycling market still struggling after China stopped accepting most U.S. plastics last year and bins often contaminated with nonrecyclable items, educators and experts are trying to encourage people to reduce waste and recycle right.

Gone are the days when the focus was on consumers recycling as much as possible.

So what should Nicholson do with that tofu container?

"When in doubt, throw it out," said Kate Davenport, co-president of Eureka Recycling.

HOW DID WE GET HERE?

The recycling market was thrown into disarray in January 2018 when China enacted a policy banning the import of most plastics. Before the ban, China handled nearly half the world's recyclable waste.

The ban left the domestic market flooded with material that would have been shipped to China. In the Midwest, the impact was less dramatic because recycled material is often sold locally but the value of the material still went down.

Almost two years after China's ban went into effect, prices remain low. Some recyclables, such as mixed office paper and newspaper, have almost no value.

The city of St. Paul, which has a revenue-sharing agreement for its recyclables with the non-profit Eureka Recycling, had made a profit from materials before the ban.

However, this year St. Paul is paying more than \$200,000 to help with costs needed to recycle material. Two years ago, the value of the material was so high the city received more than \$450,000 for recyclables.

RECYCLE BETTER, EVEN IF IT MEANS LESS

At the consumer level, it can be hard to tell anything has changed.

People continue to recycle. Curbside recycling bins are picked up at their scheduled time. The annual fee St. Paul households pay for recycling hasn't changed.

The most noticeable impact from China's ban is that people are encouraged not to recycle as much as possible, but rather to recycle better.

A more competitive recycling market is forcing people to examine what is being put in the recycling bin.

"The important thing we are seeing though on top of this, it is driving St. Paul and other communities ... to improve the quality of the material being recycled," said Kris Hageman, St. Paul's environmental coordinator.

WHAT IF YOU FEEL BAD NOT RECYCLING?

Jenny Kedward, an environmental specialist for Dakota County, said messages around recycling often lead to consumers feeling bad about not recycling.

"This guilt is driving us to put everything in the recycling bin because we know trash is bad," Kedward said.

To avoid those negative feelings, she suggests trying to reduce consumption or buying products with different packaging.

"We want to empower people, it is hard to do when you feel frustrated by recycling," she said.

Kedward says to focus on recycling basic items like cans, bottles, paper and cardboard. These items are easier for facilities to sort.

A GLASS BOTTLE MOVING THROUGH THE RECYCLING STREAM

Glass is a good recyclable because it doesn't have a set number of lives, like plastic.

Here's how it moves through the local recycling stream:

The glass bottle is collected from a curbside recycling bin before being delivered to Eureka's facility in Minneapolis, where it enters a daily stream of approximately 425 tons of material.

There, it is separated from other recyclables and broken down into shards.

The pieces of glass are then sent to Strategic Materials in St. Paul to be sorted by color. Next, at Anchor Glass in Shakopee, the glass is melted down and made into a new bottle.

The entire process takes about 72 hours.

NOT WORTH MESSING UP THE WHOLE SYSTEM



From above, workers sort out non recyclables into different corrals at the Eureka Recycling Facility in Minneapolis on Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2019. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

While experts promote putting glass into the recycle bin, other items, like dirty food containers, can be difficult to sort out and can contaminate the system.

“Little pieces of plastic you are throwing in the bin aren’t worth messing up the whole system,” Kedward said.

At Eureka Recycling, items such as plastic bags can clog the machines that sort the material, slowing down production.

Lynn Hoffman, co-president of Eureka Recycling, said recycling gets really complicated because while plastic bags are recyclable, their program is unable to collect them because they get stuck in the machines.

Hoffman suggests bringing plastic bags to local grocery stores, where they often can be recycled.

Around 7 to 8 percent of the material brought to Eureka’s facility does not end up being recycled because the items are nonrecyclable or are missed by the machines.

To help address contamination rates, Eureka has an [app](#) customers can consult to determine whether certain items should be put in the recycling bin.

Morse Nicholson said she will often set aside items like light bulbs and batteries if she is unsure whether or not they are recyclable and will later seek answers online about what to do with them.

WHAT'S THE SOLUTION?

Some argue that the solution is to standardize labeling on recycling bins. This would likely make the process less confusing for consumers and reduce how much trash enters the recycling stream.

Rep. Betty McCollum is pushing for a national, standardized labeling system for recycling bins.

A recently passed House appropriations bill includes language directing the Environmental Protection Agency to develop a national recycling strategy and examine a system that standardizes labels on recycling bins.

"If labels get legislated, the government becomes the guardian," said Mitch Hedlund, founder of Recycle Across America, an organization pushing for the standardized system. Having uniform instructions on recycling bins would make it easier for people to discern what can be recycled where, she added.

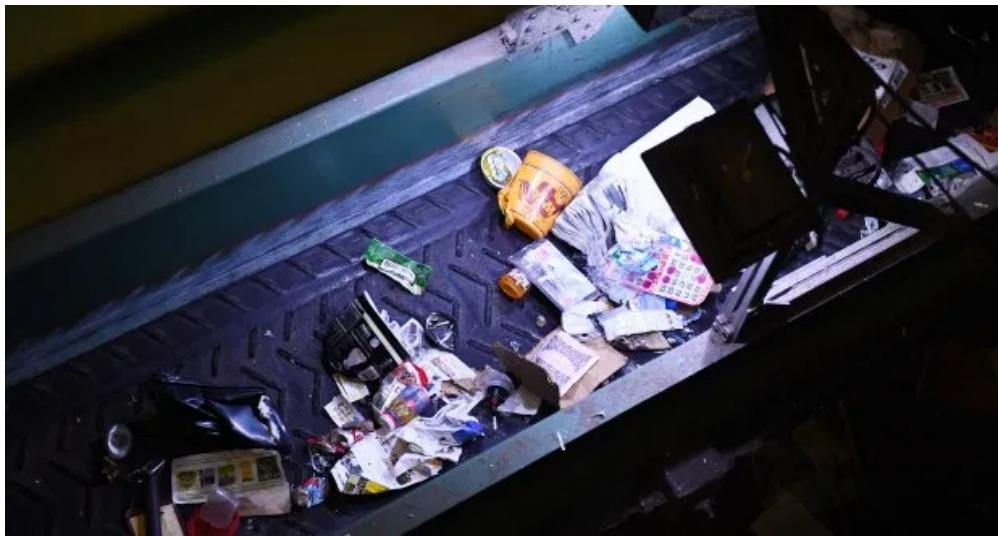
The way recycling labels look today is not consistent. When different municipalities create their own labeling system, it can be confusing and lead people to put nonrecyclable items into the blue bins.

"As long as recycling stays confusing for the public, it will always be crippled and dysfunctional," Hedlund said.

Some experts say the narrative that consumers are to blame needs to change. They argue that responsibility needs to fall on manufacturers.

"Consumers have been the fall guy for the past 30 years. We are told they should be educated and buy recyclable products," said Davenport. "It is unfair to put it all on the consumer."

CHINA'S BAN A GOOD THING?



A camera using artificial intelligence keeps track of and learns about items that are rejected for recycling at the Eureka Recycling Facility n Minneapolis on Wednesday, Sept. 18, 2019. (John Autey / Pioneer Press)

While China's ban left the recycling market in disarray, some say it needed to happen.

Before the ban, Eureka Recycling officials said they did not see much economic incentive to get cleaner, high-quality material.

Now, more efforts are underway to encourage consumers to recycle better and use less.

According to Davenport, the ban was the best thing that could have happened to the industry because it pulled back the curtain on the flaws in recycling practices.

WHAT WILL THE FUTURE LOOK LIKE?

While the value of recycled material continues to be low, experts say recycling will not be going away.

Conditions are improving following China's ban because a flooded domestic market is forcing people to find new ways to reuse material.

While consumers are encouraged to recycle better and put more care into what they are recycling, experts say the bigger long-term solution is overall reduction.

"We can't recycle our way out of the problem," Davenport said.

Tags: Business Environment Minnesota St. Paul



Natalie Rademacher

As you comment, please be respectful of other commenters and other viewpoints. Our goal with article comments is to provide a space for civil, informative and constructive conversations. We reserve the right to remove any comment we deem to be defamatory, rude, insulting to others, hateful, off-topic or reckless to the community. See our full terms of use [here](#).

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)