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Recycling's costs expected to grow as demand for materials eases

Solutions include less packaging, universal beer bottles



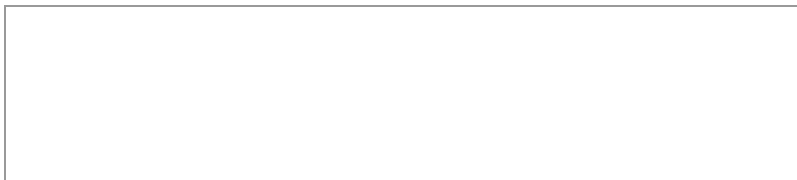
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Scrap metal piled up at the Port of Rensselaer across from the Port of Albany Wednesday Nov. 7, 2018 in Rensselaer, NY. (John Carl D'Annibale/Times Union)

Cooperstown

China's decision to stop accepting much of America's recycling materials will result in higher disposal fees for many people, at least in the short term, but it also presents an opportunity to create solutions closer to home.



That was the message during Wednesday's conference by the New York

State Association for Reduction, Reuse and Recycling, where several hundred people heard about innovative ideas such as creation of a universal beer bottle for microbreweries in Oregon and getting product makers, rather than local governments, to bear the financial burden of product disposal.

The U.S. recycling industry has been shaken by the Chinese "National Sword" policy announced in 2017 that aimed to severely restrict the amount of recycled paper, plastics, metals and other materials from overseas. That has caused a glut of recyclables as values plummeted, forcing some local governments and waste haulers to impose new fees to cover increasing expenses.

Homeowners can help by knowing what should be placed into curbside recycling bins, and what should not, said Kelli Timbrook, president of the association, which represents recycling programs and companies across the state.

Mixing recyclable and non-recycling items together for collection is called "contamination," she said, and requires recycling firms to sort through loads, which takes time and costs more money.

"People need to educate themselves on this difference. And to start, never, never put plastic bags into the recycling," Timbrook said. She said the town of Bethlehem in the Capital District is an example of a local recycling program that has an effective sorting program, which helps the town avoid unnecessary expenses.

Even having a local microbrew can be done with an eye toward recycling, said Jerry Powell, keynote speaker at the conference and publisher of Resource Recycling, Plastics Recycling Update and E-Scrap News. He previously owned or managed recycling companies in Portland, Oregon.

As part of its bottle recycling law, that state recently adopted a standard beer bottle for use in the microbrewing industry, which is responsible for about half of the beer consumed statewide, he said.

It is the first statewide refillable beer bottle program in the country. An industry

cooperative actually owns the bottles and operates a collection and cleaning center, with bottles later sent back out to breweries for reuse, he said. The bottles have been designed to be used up to 40 times before having to be crushed for reprocessing into new glass.

Many states are also beginning to consider adopting "producer responsibility" laws that will require the makers of products to bear the financial responsibility for their ultimate disposal, said Scott Cassel, CEO of the Product Stewardship Institute, a nationwide not-for-profit with members in 47 states.

Such rules are already in effect in Europe, Canada, China and India for paper and packaging materials, he said. While the U.S. has a 50 percent recycling rate for such materials, the rate is much higher in countries that have such laws, he said.

In Europe, paper and packaging recycling rates can be 70 percent or greater. In British Columbia, which Cassel said had the strongest law, that recycling rate is 72 percent.

Manufacturers fold in the costs of supporting the packaging recycling law into the prices of products, said Thomas Metzner, an official with the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection.

"That works out to about 50 cents on every \$100 worth of products," he said. "The impact on buying groceries is minimal." Such laws also encourage industry to design materials with minimal packaging, he added.

Sometimes, recycling efforts can be purely local or focus on areas that might have been overlooked. In Tompkins County, the not-for-profit Finger Lakes ReUse operates two community stores for reused goods, said Executive Director Diane Cohen.

The group has also started free "repair cafes" for people to bring in items for possible fixing, she said. And volunteers have even started "recycling" houses that were earmarked for demolition by taking them apart piece by piece.

"It takes about nine days," said Cohen. "Pulling nails is very therapeutic."

H E A R S T

