

The great Green Wall of China

Stricter scrutiny of foreign materials is creating a backlog at Metro Vancouver recyclers

BY KELLY SINOSKI, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 1, 2013



A Chinese worker piles up the plastic bottles collected at a recycling center in Hefei, east China's Anhui province. China's 10-month 'Green Fence' policy has led to stricter scrutiny of foreign materials, carrying everything from paper to metals and plastics.

Photograph by: Str, AFP, Getty Images, Vancouver Sun

Metro Vancouver recycling firms are seeing a backlog of recyclable materials, particularly plastics, after China decided it would no longer accept other nations' dirty plastics or potentially contaminated

recovered materials.

China's so-called 10-month Green Fence policy, which came into effect in February, has led to stricter scrutiny of foreign containers carrying everything from paper to metals and plastics when they arrive at the Chinese docks.

If a load is considered to be potentially contaminated - containing food or glass or mixed materials, for instance - the entire load is rejected on the spot and sent back, at what some say costs an estimated \$10,000 to \$18,000 per container.

Plastic bags, lower-grade plastics, coloured plastics or materials with food residue are among the materials being returned. In one case, bales of what were supposed to be mixed paper were rejected en route.

The situation, which has affected exporters from North America to Europe, has led to a "significant" backlog of mainly low-grade plastics at sites such as Urban Impact's New Westminster recycling plant, said CEO Nicole Stefenelli. The company has hired more staff to ensure any products are clean before the inspections stage and before they're loaded onto containers.

"We have not had any rejections but you can imagine the costs of a rejected load," Stefenelli said. "It's not really a positive situation. It's very challenging. Ultimately we have to have somewhere to store (the material) while we decide what to do with it or find an alternative source, or it goes into the landfill.

"Real estate is expensive in the Lower Mainland. You can't just sit on this product forever."

The move, part of China's attempts to boost the country's environmental performance, comes more than a decade after China opened its doors to the world with an insatiable appetite for recovered metals, plastics and fibre.

Its decision to shut the door now poses a near-crisis to the industry, with prices for exports of shredded aluminum falling amid a rise in piles of plastic bags and yogurt containers at local depots.

But Stefenelli noted the move also highlights the need for recyclers to provide more quality products to China, which had been seen by some as a dumping ground for waste. "It means an emphasis on quality," she said. "We can't just dump things in a market just because they have an appetite for it.

"What needs to be recognized by all parts of the supply chain is the more mixed it is, the more difficult it is to make a quality product at the end. You really have to spend more time to make sure the quality is there."

Stefenelli believes China will eventually change its mind as it needs a massive amount of recovered materials. But in the meantime, the industry will have to shape up, she said, by creating a better blend of domestic and foreign markets.

Sebastian van Wollen, president of Blue Planet Recycling in Langley, which processes plastic materials, said **it's time more companies looked domestically to recycle materials.**

Jason Kemp, manager of Westcoast Plastic Recycling, agreed. His company, which had shipped about 60 containers a month to China when the situation was more flexible, was shocked when the edict first came down, he said, but two weeks ago decided to diversify into more domestic and North American markets. His company is also continuing to look for opportunities in India and Malaysia.

"This just gave us a heavy push we needed to keep all that we could local," he said. "There are a lot of people going through a lot of hard times right now."

Allen Langdon, of Multi-Materials B.C., a non-profit group of retailers and manufacturers, said his organization hopes to avoid such situations by changing the way products are packaged.

MMBC is devising a plan to reduce the amount of packaging and to make industry bear the full cost of recycling products and packaging and increase the opportunities for recycled content.

"Our whole strategy is finding ways to increase the value for those materials," he said. "At the end of the day we have to create a market in a number of places, not just China."

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