



Contamination in recycling material

Adapting to recycling challenges

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If you have a recycling operation, you are most likely in the midst of change. The old way of collecting and processing recyclable materials is no longer sustainable following China's waste import restrictions. Agencies are examining their operations and looking at the best options to mitigate contamination and rising costs.

One approach, as some agencies have done, is to completely suspend recycling collection. Citing the extreme cost and lack of recycling markets, the City of Deltona, Fla., has temporarily suspended their recycling program beginning February 1, 2019. In June

2018, Douglas County, Ore., suspended recycling of newspaper, plastic containers, plastic bottles, paper, commingle, glass, and cardboard. The City of Deerfield Beach, Fla., suspended recycling collection in July 2018 before relaunching in September 2018 with a focus on eliminating contamination and monitoring routes.

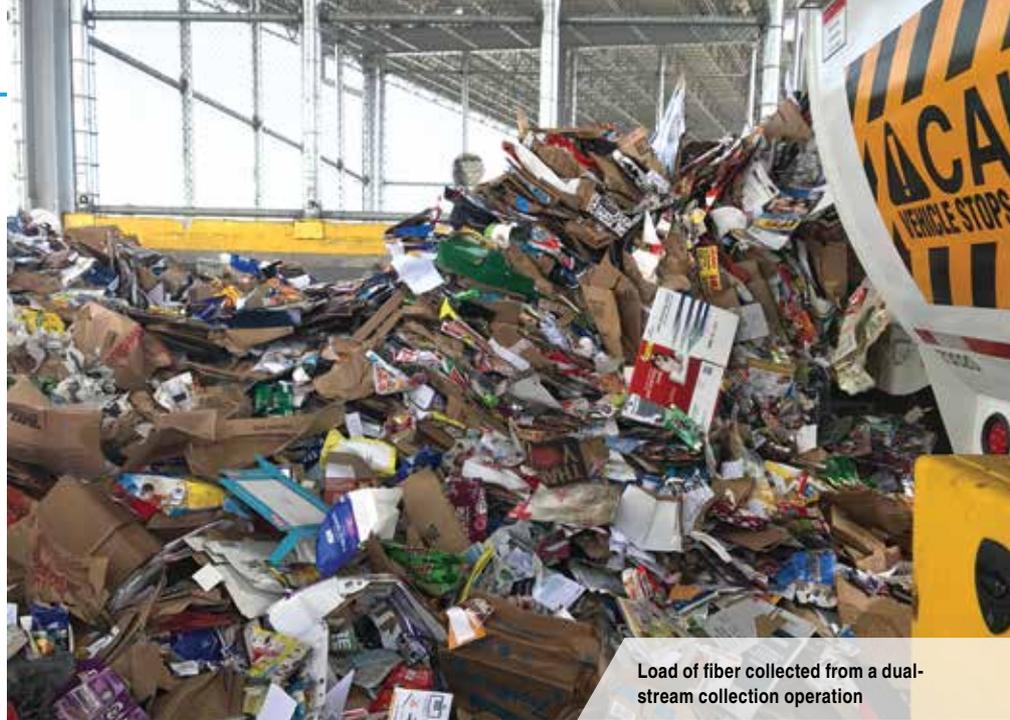
Returning to, or remaining with, dual-stream recycling collection is another approach for agencies looking to collect cleaner recyclable materials. As single-stream systems are costing more, dual-stream collection limits contamination since residents are required to

source separate materials, usually placing paper products in one container and commingled plastics, glass and metals in the other.

A few agencies that have reverted from single-stream to dual-stream recycling at the start of this year are the Ulster County Resource Recovery Agency, N.Y., and North Glengarry, Ontario. The City of Brookhaven, N.Y., returned to dual-stream collection but no longer accepts glass bottles and jars curbside, and in Troy, Mo., the switch back to dual-stream eliminated curbside pickup of glass, mixed paper and cardboard. They joined a larger group of agencies that have either made the switch to, or chosen to stay with, dual-stream recycling collection.

The Solid Waste Authority of Palm Beach County (SWA) has had a dual-stream recycling program since the late 1980s and owns a Recovered Materials Processing Facility (RMPF) that has been operating since 2009. The facility processes about 90,000 tons of material annually. A little more than four years ago the contamination rate on their incoming material was estimated to be 20%, prompting SWA to begin watching input at their transfer stations to understand the contamination in greater detail. They then brought in the haulers to discuss their findings and share that SWA would be more critical and start calling incoming loads contaminated if they did not meet specifications. Calling loads garbage instead of recyclables would bring about a tipping fee cost, as there was no tipping fee for recyclables. Shortly thereafter, the contamination rate started to decline and now is estimated at 8-9%.

Willie Puz, Public Affairs and Recycling Director with the Solid Waste Authority of Palm Beach County, said some of the contamination SWA was experiencing stemmed from collection worker error, some was from truck maintenance issues where materials would get mixed either in the hopper or when the load was dumped at the transfer station, and some was from the



Load of fiber collected from a dual-stream collection operation

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residents. “In our new collection contract that will start October 1, 2019, we will require split-body rear load trucks which we believe will help reduce contamination even further,” stated Puz.

Driver errors and truck issues can be identified and improved, but the big contributor to recycling contamination woes are the generators. Agencies everywhere are stepping up public educational efforts and using a whole new vernacular: Wish-cycling, getting “Back to Basics” and “When in Doubt, Throw it Out,” all with the goal of getting non-recyclable materials out (e.g., plastic bags, hoses, etc.) and making sure recyclable materials are prepared the right way (e.g., rinsed, property separated, etc.)

Helping to ease public confusion about recycling are a vast number of non-profit organizations with resources available for your agency. The Recycling Partnership offers tools to help communities address inbound curbside recycled material quality, including the “Oops” tags that alerted residents to items that did not belong in their recy-

cling cart. Recycling Across America is implementing a society-wide standardized labeling system for recycling bins and introducing a celebrity-led PSA campaign to help people begin to recycle right. Keep America Beautiful has a variety of national programs and initiatives to improve recycling by educating and engaging individuals to recycle more of the right things the right way. An internet search will bring up a treasure trove of additional organizations that can help you in your recycling public education efforts.

As everyone works through the current recycling situation, it is important to keep our focus on the benefits of recycling and to recognize that the industry has peaks and troughs. There are challenges and our recycling programs will evolve and change. We will research, innovate and make adjustments that help make recycling more economically sustainable and provide recyclables for the manufacturing world.

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