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The China Crisis – Whose Crisis is It?

WASHINGTON DC, May 15, 2018 -- It is ours. Recycled materials and trash should look very different from each other, but for years they have been converging in the U.S. China has not been the creator of today's crisis in the industry – U.S. mills have been complaining for years – but China's recent embargo of U.S. recycling imports is shining a mirror on our recycling industry and providing a clear signal that we can no longer pretend diversion of waste into a recycling bin is recycling.

MRFs (Material Recovery Facilities) can produce quality materials out of both single stream and dual stream inputs, but not when 20+% of the input "recyclable" stream, in some cases, are not recyclables. The plants are not built to handle those specs, and slower, cleaner processing has not historically been rewarded with higher market prices. Now fast, dirty recycling is being punished with no markets. Rightly so. Clean material is a resource; dirty is not. Clean recyclables have been the minority for years.

The good news and bad news is that customer enthusiasm for recycling is strong. The public wants to recycle, but they express that enthusiasm by recycling materials that are not eligible. A combination of "wishful recycling" and insufficient enforcement of quality is proving very damaging to the industry – abysmal and volatile markets, a dirty product that is not a reliable "commodity", closed plants, and programs that are hurting economically.

The National Recycling Coalition, along with other major industry associations, is working aggressively in a new nationwide collaborative, to develop strategies to resolve some of these fundamental industry and market issues.

In the meantime, the National Recycling Coalition notes that it is important to **remind your residential customers now that they should ONLY recycle the items on their LOCAL recyclables list. This is important for U.S. users of recycled materials, and the current China embargo makes this an opportune time for this reminder.** When in Doubt – throw it in the trash!

We cannot continue to act and behave as if business as usual will offer a solution to today's issues. We must fundamentally shift how we speak to the public, how we collect and process our recyclables, and what our end markets accept and utilize to truly recycle. The NRC is working through collaboratives, its series of Market Development Workshops, and Quarterly Market Calls to take steps to turn recycling into an industry with a quality product, but we all need to work together to meet the challenge. It seems about time – or so the world is telling us.

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If you would like more information about this topic, or NRC's Series of Recycling Markets Development Workshops, or NRC's Quarterly Market Calls, please call Marjorie Griek at 720/745-0966 or email marjie@nrcycles.org.