

BIR: China needs to understand “we are the good guys”

BIR’s International Environment Council (IEC) meeting in New Delhi was devoted almost entirely to the issue that is preoccupying great swathes of the recycling industry: China’s import ban affecting certain secondary raw materials.

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During a panel discussion moderated by BIR World President Ranjit Singh Baxi in the absence of IEC’s Chairman Olivier François of Galloo, it was explained by Robin Wiener, President of the US Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI), that the latest policy developments in China reflect a multi-pronged strategy published in July, the goals of which include: prohibiting imports of solid waste that entail “major environmental hazards and intense public reaction” by the end of 2017; halting imports that can be replaced by domestic resources; greater customs enforcement; refinement of laws, regulations and related systems; and increased domestic recycling.

From these pointers, Ms Wiener said, it becomes apparent that self-sufficiency in scrap is “an important driver” for the Chinese government. Also noting that the strategy calls for a raising of thresholds for imports, she said a proposed 0.3% contamination ceiling for carried waste constitutes “an effective ban” because, from all the recyclers to which she has spoken on this issue, “no-one thinks they can meet that threshold”.

For the USA, China’s actions have the potential to affect US\$ 6.5 billion of annual exports and 150,000 related jobs. The fact that some US municipalities have stopped accepting certain papers and plastics in their kerbside collection programmes has been “a big force for us in raising this issue with the US government”, Ms Wiener said. Meetings have already taken place with the White House and US Congress among others, she added.

For Europe, the Secretary General of the European Recycling Industries' Confederation Emmanuel Katrakis explained that his organisation's response has included gathering information from members about the specific impacts of China's policy so that the European Commission can be armed with "hard data" when mounting its case.

Panellists underlined the crucial need for the global recycling industry to continue to work together on common arguments and to encourage the involvement of China's manufacturers and consumers of imported secondary raw materials, with several contributors to the debate arguing that the import ban has the potential to be highly damaging to China's own businesses.

BIR's Director General Arnaud Brunet focused on the lessons that must be learned from recent policy developments in China, calling on national recycling associations to watch for "signals" of similar changes taking place in other countries – "because we have to be ready", he stressed. Governments need to be shown the benefits of partnering with recycling industry professionals, he added, "because we have good practices, we are the good guys". Mr Brunet is scheduled to travel to China in November where he hopes to meet key officials and to gain an understanding of "the next step" and "where they are going".

Michael Lion, President of Everwell Resources in China and Chairman of BIR's International Trade Council, laid emphasis on the fact that China's President Xi Jinping has taken "a very personal interest" in the improvement of the country's environment. The challenge for recycling industry representatives, he said, is to gain access to people "at the highest political level" within China and to explain – "in a helpful and respectful way" – how the recycling industry can work with them to a solution that is "commercially and socially advantageous to them".

In reviewing BIR activities at the level of intergovernmental organisations, its Trade & Environment Director Ross Bartley pointed out that a UNEP-Basel Convention Expert Working Group is to review various annexes of the Convention which have key relevance to waste and scrap. BIR is "in a good position" regarding this debate, not least because it has "engagement in the Expert Working Group", he added.

Source: BIR