



New rules place restrictions on global plastic scrap trade

The Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste has been amended, requiring countries to obtain prior informed consent before exporting contaminated or mixed plastic scrap.

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Governments at the 14th Conference of the Parties (COP14) of the Basel Convention have voted in support of restricting plastic scrap exports by requiring countries to obtain prior informed consent before exporting contaminated or mixed plastic scrap. According to the proposal from Norway, a summary of which is available [here](#), the amendments to the [Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Waste](#) are designed to “clean up the international trade in plastic waste,” helping to reduce leakage of plastics into the marine environment and communities.

Under the amendment, plastic waste is divided into three general categories:

- “clean” plastic “waste” that has been sorted prior to export that has been prepared to specification and is suitable for immediate recycling with minimal further mechanical preparatory treatment processes, if any;
- “other” plastic waste, which contains mixed plastics or other wastes or is contaminated and is subject to the control system of the Basel Convention; and

- “hazardous” plastic waste, which is contaminated with ([Annex I](#)) constituents to the extent that it exhibits (Annex III) hazardous characteristics and is subject to Basel Convention controls.

The [World Wildlife Fund](#) (WWF) notes that mixes of polyethylene (PE), polypropylene (PP) and polyethylene terephthalate (PET) will be exempted from the consent requirement.

The United States is one of only two countries that has not ratified the Basel Convention. However, the treaty still affects U.S. importers and exporters, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says. Parties to the Basel Convention cannot trade Basel-covered waste with nonparties without a predetermined agreement between the countries.

A number of environmental groups welcomed the passage of the amendment, which will become effective at the start of 2021.

“With this amendment, many developing countries will, for the first time, have information about plastic wastes entering their country and be empowered to refuse plastic waste dumping,” says Sara Brosché, science advisor to Sweden-based [IPEN](#), a global network of public interest nongovernmental (NGOs) working together to end the use of toxic chemicals. “For far too long developed countries like the U.S. and Canada have been exporting their mixed toxic plastic wastes to developing Asian countries claiming it would be recycled in the receiving country. Instead, much of this contaminated mixed waste cannot be recycled and is instead dumped or burned or finds its way into the ocean.”

Jim Puckett, director of the [Basel Action Network](#) (BAN), Seattle, says the passage of the amendment is “a major first step to stem the tide of plastic waste now flowing from the rich developed countries to developing countries in Africa and Asia, all in the name of ‘recycling,’ but causing massive and harmful pollution, both on land and in the sea.”

He adds, “A true circular economy was never meant to circulate pollution around the globe. It can only be achieved by eliminating negative externalities and not just thrusting the harm on developing countries.”

However, the [Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries](#) (ISRI), Washington, says the effort “will hamper the world’s ability to recycle plastic material, creating an increased risk of pollution.”

ISRI’s statement on the passage of the amendment reads in part: “Recycling is part of the solution to the global issue of plastic pollution. In fact, the amendment does not restrict trade in scrap plastic commodities that meet the ISRI Specifications. However, as written, the new listings for controlled plastics, and the requirement that exporters file ‘prior informed consent’ requests, will create an administrative burden that will make it harder for countries without recycling capacity to export collected plastics to countries with the infrastructure in place. It also does little to fight the illicit trade and poor handling of end-of-life plastics that are the real cause of pollution around the world.”

ISRI adds that it intends to actively participate in the Partnership on Plastic Waste that the Conference of Parties adopted, saying, “Recycling works, and ISRI will share its expertise with the international community to demonstrate that recycling plastics in a responsible

manner helps save the environment. Recycling that incorporates the highest standards in environmental, health, safety and quality directs these valuable resources into the manufacturing supply chain, thereby generating both economic and environmental opportunities.”

In a news release regarding the amendment’s approval, the [Bureau of International Recycling](#) (BIR), Brussels, says, “Countries across the world worked together to create a step-change in the Basel Convention itself in order to alleviate the damage plastic does to life in the oceans and on land.” The BIR says the change will “force countries to do more to manage their own plastic waste at the point of generation.”

The BIR adds that the next challenge will be implementation, saying it “has pledged to work with the new Basel Convention Partnership on Plastic Wastes, having already played an active role in the related Household Waste Partnership that includes inter alia plastic waste. BIR is also very supportive of avowed intentions to remove or reduce hazardous constituents in plastics among the 'further actions to address waste under the Basel Convention.'"