

# **Plastic recycling: how to cope after China's ban**

A Chinese ban has sent shockwaves through the recycling industry which must now rethink its strategy

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It is strange to think that an edict rubber stamped in Beijing could directly affect the bottom line of local authorities from Birmingham to Brisbane. But that's exactly what happened when China slammed the door on all global imports of low-grade plastic, card and paper packaging waste earlier this year.

The bottom has well and truly fallen out of the market; in the UK paper prices were at £90 a tonne, now some are deemed worthless. One council could lose £3 million a year from recyclable material, according to the Local Government Association (LGA), another will have to pay an extra £500,000 to sort paper and reduce contamination. Similar issues resonate whether you're in Australia, Canada or the United States.

"China's manipulation of the market is a wake-up call to the recycling industry that has been relying on the country as a destination for low-quality materials," says MP Mary Creagh, chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. "The public do not want to see our waste sent overseas, and I want plastic recycling and reprocessing at home, creating new British green jobs."

## **China's ban on plastic recycling has simply sent it elsewhere**

However, that's not exactly what's happening. Unsurprisingly, the multi-million-tonne a year plastic recycling issue has found willing markets elsewhere including India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Turkey and even Poland, many of which are less regulated.

“Exports to Taiwan, which is not included in the China ban, grew by a staggering 1,200 per cent. There’s clear evidence that these countries are struggling to cope with the sudden influx. We are generating more waste than our plastic recycling system can cope with,” explains Fiona Nicholls, plastics campaigner at Greenpeace.

The unintended consequences of the ban led to stories of more virgin material being used by Chinese mills and plastics producers. Not exactly the plan. This means less recyclable material, more felled forests and more fossil fuels.

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“You could argue that the Chinese strategy, which was introduced to improve the environment, has actually had the opposite effect,” says Simon Ellin, chief executive of The Recycling Association. “The World Trade Organization (WTO) should look closely at this; also the same quality criteria for imports are not applied domestically in China, which contravenes WTO trade rules.”

# 45%

of the world’s plastic waste  
has been exported to China  
since 1992

United Nations Comtrade Database

# 111m

metric tonnes of plastic waste will  
have to be redirected by 2030  
because of the Chinese ban

University of Georgia

## **The quality of material in supply chain must improve**

However, after January’s ban, the fear that vast amounts of packaging would go to landfill have yet to materialise, although there are reports of low-grade plastics, such as black plastic trays, being incinerated for energy recovery.

“Poland is reporting that poor-quality plastics are being discarded and set on fire. Thailand is clamping down on imports where low-value plastics have been abandoned at ports. Indonesia is concerned it may be inadvertently importing sub-standard materials and has introduced 100 per cent inspections,” says Mr Ellin.

The strong message from recent events is the need to improve the quality of material that’s generated throughout the whole supply chain. It helps that a recent hike in oil prices has buoyed the price of higher-quality plastics such as PET (polyethylene terephthalate) bottles and polyethylene film.

“On a macro level, it’s about shifting incentives and making secondary raw materials more competitive against virgin alternatives,” says Jakob Rindegren, recycling policy adviser at the Environmental Services Association. “We need to get better at linking waste management policy more closely with product, as well as climate change policy, and consider the end of life of products already at the design stage.”

### **The road to a new age of plastic recycling has many steps**

This kind of joined-up thinking is at a nascent stage. A regulatory crackdown on single-use plastics across Europe will help, so will design for recyclability; for instance, so paper products avoid bonding to plastics, as with some food packaging, as well as a reduction in the range of plastic polymer colours.

The next step is to recycle more in each market and create a localised, strong, end-economy for collected material. Some in the industry think that taxes on virgin material, particularly plastics, could encourage more recycled packaging.

“The key here is the political will power to prohibit the placing on the market of non-recyclable materials,” explains Ross Bartley, trade and environment director at the Bureau of International Recycling based in Belgium. “Consumer awareness is also important, but will enough consumers boycott goods themselves or the packaging they come in?”

Reform of the producer responsibility system for packaging is another focus, with more obligations on producers in the offing. Currently, the UK raises the lowest level of contribution from producers among all European Union countries, at less than €20 a tonne of material, compared with more than €150 in France and Spain, and €200 in Austria, according to the European Commission.

“Any new scheme must ensure that producers take greater responsibility for the life cycle of the waste they create. This burden is currently predominantly placed on council tax payers,” the LGA says.

Mr Ellin at The Recycling Association says: “If you don’t design for maximum recyclability, you should pay more and we should make it financially beneficial for those who invest in the circular economy.”

## **Time is running out to hit plastic recycling targets**

Time's running out, by 2030 an estimated 111 million tonnes of plastic globally could have nowhere to go, according to research from the University of Georgia.

Chinese recyclers are also now expressing interest in setting up facilities in Europe and the United States, partly to pelletise and export the material for plastic recycling in packaging.

"One of the big changes we're likely to see is full cost recovery for producers to cover the price of meeting packaging and plastic recycling targets," says Mr Rindegren. "This is part of the circular economy package which was recently adopted by the EU and is likely to feature in the consultation on the producer responsibility system, which is linked to the UK government's resources and waste strategy expected later this year." It is time consumers revalued these materials.