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Local recycling concerns mount

By Nick Marnell



A Republic Services truck picks up recyclables in a Lafayette neighborhood on April 13. Photo Andy Scheck

China's March 1 decision to halt import of select categories of solid waste, including certain types of plastics, paper and textiles, has put pressure on the local recycling industry, as public officials look for ways to offset the loss of a large market for the recycle and reuse of disposable products.

Solid waste disposal in Lamorinda is managed by the Central Contra Costa Solid Waste Authority, a joint powers authority operating as RecycleSmart. Its board of directors includes two representatives from each member agency - unincorporated Contra Costa County plus five county municipalities - with Lafayette Council Member Mike Anderson the 2018 board chair. The authority contracts with Republic Services to collect recycled product from homes and businesses, and with Mt. Diablo Recycling to package the recycled product and sell or otherwise dispose of it.

In 2017, Republic collected 5,503 tons of recyclable materials in Lafayette, 3,437 tons in Moraga and 3,891 tons in Orinda. Those figures were virtually identical with the 2016 totals.

According to Ken Etherington, executive director of RecycleSmart, Mt. Diablo Recycling sold all of the 2016-17 Lamorinda recyclables to China, which now threatens to halt the import of much of that material. "These are the most severe import restrictions from China I have ever seen," Etherington said. "China still accepts recycling; however, the materials need to be very clean and free of contamination, like garbage and food waste." The contamination threshold China now permits is 0.5 percent.

Anderson noted that recent audits of recyclable materials show that the amount of contamination has increased from 5 percent to 8 percent. "Keeping these recyclables 'clean' is the number one way to keep the cost of recycling of these materials low and guarantees that there will be a market for them," he said.

"I think all agencies within the RecycleSmart Authority are concerned about the recent restrictions China has placed on recyclables," said Roger Wykle, Moraga representative on the authority board. Both he and Orinda RecycleSmart board member Amy Worth encourage the contractor to seek other markets for the sale of recyclables.

In 2017, Southeast Asia countries answered the bell, with Thailand increasing recyclable imports 400 percent, Malaysia 295 percent and Vietnam 105 percent over 2016. "But will there be enough capacity in those countries?" Marva Sheehan of HF&H Consultants asked the CCCSWA board in February.

"Collectively, we may also need to take a serious look at processing this material here in the U.S. The best thing for Moraga would be to find a viable market for our recyclables, put these materials to good use, and keep it out of our landfills," Wykle said. Worth and Anderson also oppose sending recyclables to landfills.

Creating new domestic plants to recycle the recyclables will take years, but consumer education can make a much quicker impact. Etherington said that the authority will soon run a program of heavy consumer outreach to stress keeping recyclables clean and free of contamination, making them easier to market. "Don't throw out your mayonnaise jar with half of the product left inside. Lightly wipe out or rinse each bottle you discard," he said. "And don't use the blue cans as garbage cans."



Photo provided

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