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Official Publication of the New Jersey State League of Municipalities

April 2019

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Five Strategies for Improving Municipal Recycling in New Jersey

Despite changes in the recycling marketplace, recycling still makes sense for New Jersey's communities

By Steven Rinaldi, Research Scientist, Bureau of Energy and Sustainability, NJ Department of Environmental Protection

Major changes in global recycling markets, especially the Chinese market, during the past year have caused significant challenges for the worldwide recycling community. News articles highlight how U.S. recycling programs are struggling to find markets for the materials they collect, resulting in recyclables piling up at recycling centers, commodity prices plummeting for recyclable materials, and recycling costs rising for municipal and county recyclable collection programs. Some pundits have even questioned whether recycling programs can survive in this new global economy.

Thankfully, the situation is not as dire as reported; there are proactive steps municipalities and counties can take to improve the outlook and performance of their recycling programs.

Recycling contamination

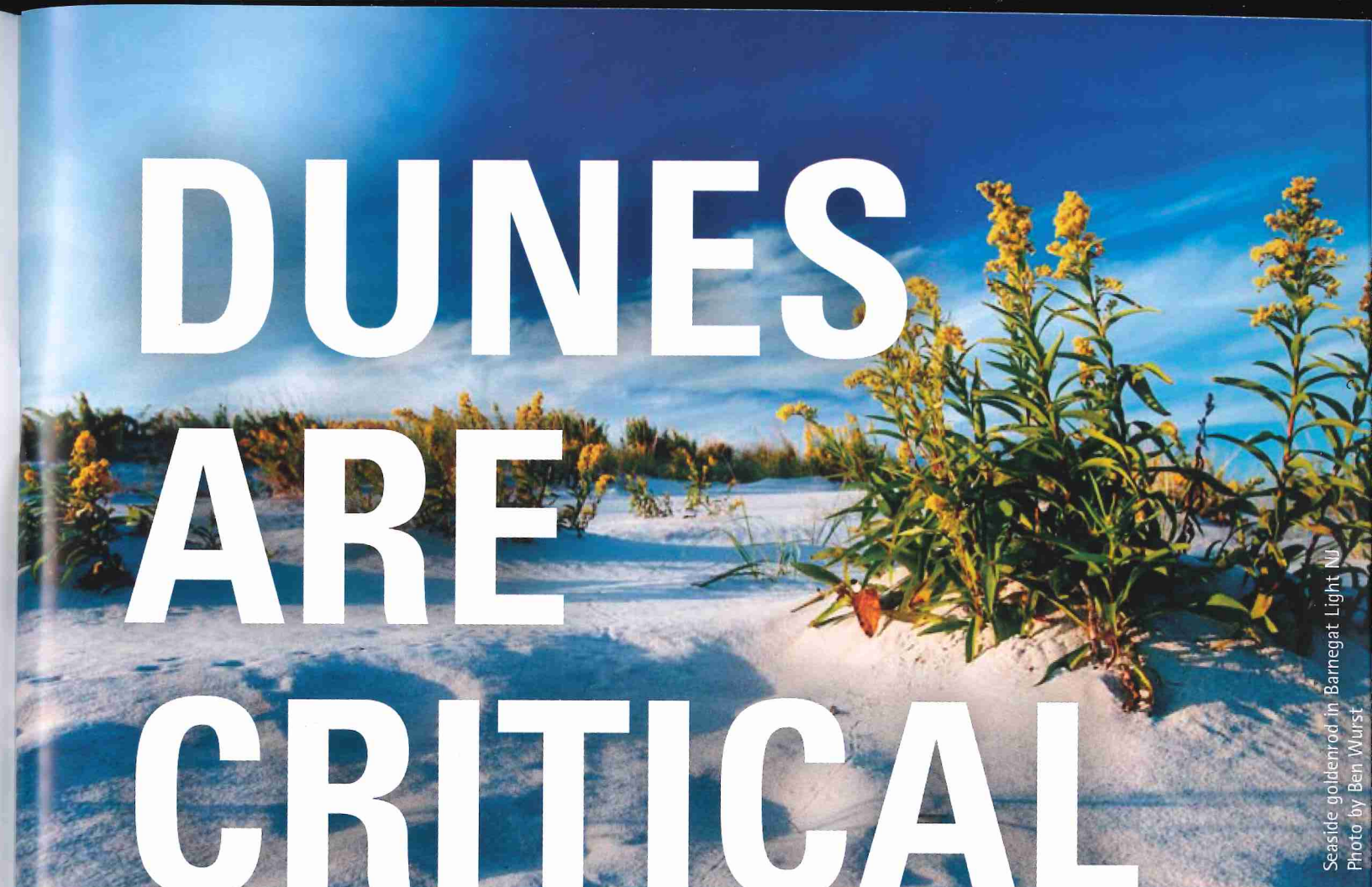
The root cause of the current situation is what the recycling community calls "recycling contamination," which occurs when non-acceptable items end up in the recycling stream. Non-acceptable materials aren't necessarily non-recyclable, but they aren't accepted by the local recycling program. Some prime examples are plastic bags, polystyrene coffee cups, garden hoses, syringes, bowling balls, and trash.



recycle.nj.gov

This gets even more complicated in a state like New Jersey, where different municipalities accept different recyclable materials. What's acceptable at your home might not be acceptable at your work. Contamination also occurs when people try to recycle acceptable materials that have been altered in some way. A good example is shredded paper that cannot be properly sorted at a recycling center and will either contaminate other recyclable materials or get disposed as trash.

The most significant consequence of recycling contamination is the loss of the Chinese recycling market. During the past two decades, roughly half of America's recyclable paper and plastic, as well as many other recyclable materials, was sent to China to be made into new products and packaging. However, high levels of recycling contamination have led to new and restrictive



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quality-control specifications, increasing the amount of U.S. material rejected by China. Ultimately, Chinese officials banned the import of numerous recyclable materials.

With the Chinese recycling market now virtually closed, recyclers around the world have been scrambling to find new end markets for the growing supply of recyclable materials. That increased supply of recyclable material versus the demand has reduced the value of most recyclable material commodities. This has had a negative impact on the economic viability of recycling, increasing the costs of municipal and county recycling programs across the nation.

Keep calm and recycle on

While this situation has resulted in some people questioning the need for recycling, recycling still makes sense for economic and environmental reasons and is still the law in New Jersey.

Municipalities and counties can implement strategies to reduce recycling contamination and improve the marketability and value of the recyclable materials collected.

First and foremost is improved local recycling education so that residents better understand their local recycling requirements, the importance of keeping recyclable materials clean and free of contaminants, and the idea that recyclable materials are not trash, but rather valuable commodities.

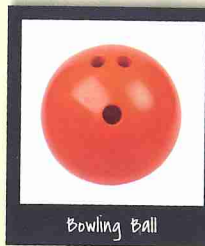
To support recycling education at the local level, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection purchased the Recycle Coach information system for the entire state. Recycle Coach provides specific information about local recycling program requirements through a weblink and through a cell phone app that enables users to have this information at their fingertips (<https://solutions.recyclecoach.com/>). Local recycling officials can also use the educational and promotional tools, including infographics, radio public service announcements, articles, and presentations, developed by the DEP. In addition, the DEP is working on social media messaging to combat recycling contamination.

RECYCLING TIP:

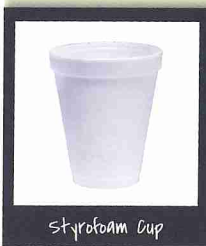
QUESTION: WHAT DO THESE FOUR ITEMS HAVE IN COMMON?



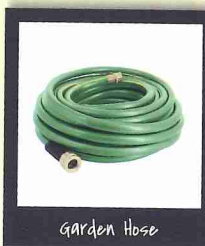
Plastic Bag



Bowling Ball



Styrofoam Cup



Garden Hose

ANSWER: NONE OF THEM BELONG IN YOUR RECYCLING BIN.

First Recycling program costs can be reduced by using free online resources for producing educational and promotional materials. Sustainable Jersey, a nonprofit organization that provides tools, training, and financial incentives to support communities as they pursue sustainability programs, provides municipalities with helpful online resources and grant funding to improve their recycling outreach.

Second enforcement at the local level is also essential to the success of any recycling program. Curbside recycling inspection programs can dramatically reduce contamination of the recycling mix and improve the marketability and value of recyclable materials. The Borough of Point Pleasant in Ocean County and the Borough of Fair Lawn in Bergen County have implemented successful recycling enforcement programs, resulting in increased participation rates and declining contamination rates.

Third additional funding is available through grants. The DEP annually provides municipalities with recycling grant funds that can be used for a variety of recycling program needs, including education and enforcement. In fact, the DEP has announced that local governments will share \$14.3 million in recycling tonnage grants for recycling efforts.

In addition, the DEP modified its recycling tonnage grant distribution formula to better financially support municipal curbside recycling efforts during this challenging time. Recycling grant funds can specifically be used to fund “boots on the ground” inspections and education programs to ensure residents, businesses, and institutions are source separating mandated recyclable materials and keeping appropriate records, so their municipality can receive recycling funds for the recycling that is accomplished.

The DEP also funds the recycling coordinator training program at Rutgers University. This comprehensive educational program teaches recycling coordinators how to improve the efficiency and cost-effectiveness of their recycling program.

Fourth some municipalities are considering a return to dual stream collection of recyclables (one recycling bin for bottles, cans, and containers and one recycling bin for paper/fiber) as opposed to the more prevalent single stream collection system (one recycling bin for all materials).

Dual stream collection typically results in less contamination and thus cleaner, more marketable recyclable materials than single stream recycling systems. In New Jersey, the Borough of Oakland made the switch back to dual stream in February 2018. There are, however, numerous factors that would make a return to a dual stream collection system difficult or impractical for many programs.

Finally, many recycling programs are also going back to the basics to enhance the cost-effectiveness of their program. By no longer collecting materials that have not been mandated in the county recycling plan and are of low value with limited marketability, costs can be reduced. For example, municipalities that are part of the Morris County Municipal Utilities Authority program are now collecting three types of plastics instead of five.

While changes in the international recycling market have led to challenging times for local recycling programs, these changes have also led to investment in new recycled paper mills and plastics recycling centers in the U.S. These

facilities will consume many thousands of tons of recyclable materials collected from curbside programs. Other positive developments include the rise in some recyclable commodity prices—for example, certain plastics—since last summer and the fact that recyclable materials are still moving through the system and getting recycled.

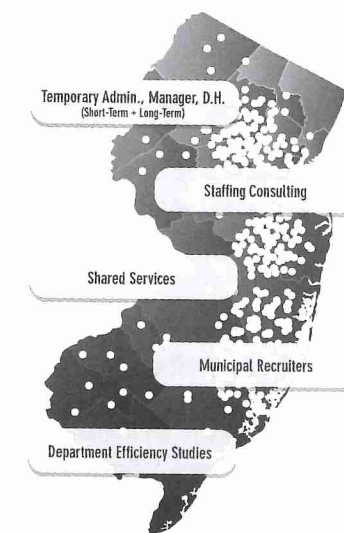
It is important to remember that recycling markets are cyclical just like other commodity markets and will bounce back in time as they react and adjust. In the meantime, municipalities are urged to focus their efforts on cleaning up the recycling stream to make their recyclable materials more marketable and valuable. ♻️

Steven Rinaldi is a Research Scientist in the NJDEP’s Bureau of Energy and Sustainability. Steven has worked on all aspects of recycling, and among other things, he coordinates the Department’s New Jersey WasteWise Business Network, works closely with Sustainable Jersey on recycling issues, and develops educational and promotional initiatives on behalf of recycling. Steven has masters and bachelors degrees from Rutgers University.

In Your Town: Recycling

Here’s how New Jersey’s communities can keep recycling environmentally friendly and economically sustainable:

- 1. Improved local education:** Take advantage of the DEP’s new Recycle Coach app (<https://solutions.recyclecoach.com/>).
- 2. Enhanced enforcement:** Curbside inspections reduce contamination, which improves the marketability of your recycling mix.
- 3. Follow the money:** The DEP has announced \$14 million in grants in 2019.
- 4. Split it up:** Where practical, consider dual-stream recycling as a way to reduce recycling contamination.
- 5. Keep it simple:** To improve the cost-effectiveness of your program, consider only collecting the mandated types of materials.



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