



Avenue de Cortenberg 71
1000 Brussels – Belgium

Phone: +32 2 742 96 82
Fax: +32 2 732 63 12
Email: info@plasticsrecyclers.eu
www.plasticsrecyclers.eu

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Overhauling old practices in plastics waste management

Exporting mixed plastic waste used to be a common practice in the past. For many countries this was an easy way out as they did not have to establish viable schemes to properly treat their waste domestically. China's decision to ban waste imports therefore posed a dilemma for many, as they would have to deal with the "unwanted" waste.

In light of this ban, claims are surfacing that plastics are becoming too expensive to recycle, as regions are struggling to process "mountains of plastic waste". Consequently, some municipalities are prompting to end the collection of plastics for recycling and therefore collect them with mainstream waste which is destined for waste-to-fuel and other recovery facilities.

This approach violates the waste hierarchy, the overarching principle of the Waste Directive and the circular economy model itself. Today we need to overhaul the unsustainable, inefficient practices that have negative environmental impacts and result in the loss of valuable resources.

Consequences of the old waste management model stem from the fact that the plastics waste is not properly collected and sorted. Comingling results in poor quality of waste due to high contamination by other materials. Additionally, properly collected plastics must be sorted per polymer type before being sold to plastics recyclers to ensure quality. EU waste exports are driven by poor quality of waste, as appropriate schemes to treat this waste are lacking within Europe. Well-functioning collection and sorting systems would enable the industry to overcome this challenge.

The Chinese ban is an opportunity to retain the waste within EU and drive the market towards the circular economy. However quality recyclable materials, separate collection and high-quality sorting schemes are needed in order to make valuable raw materials. If the waste is not properly collected or sorted the recyclers will be unable to deliver high-quality products which can be fed back to the European economy. The higher the quality of collection and efficient sorting schemes, the higher the quality of recyclers' output.

Implementation of proper collection, quality sorting and efficient recycling systems would generate a significant number of new green jobs in Europe, in addition to lowering the CO₂ emissions and raw material consumption, protecting the environment and saving scarce natural resources.

Reversal of status quo and transformation of the waste management systems can only be achieved through the cooperation of all the stakeholders in the plastics value chain, including brand owners who need to improve the recyclability of their products, and the consumers who should not be discouraged from following proper waste disposal and recycling habits. Establishing a truly sustainable waste management system for plastics will induce costs in the beginning but the social, environmental and economic benefits which would be achieved in the long run are far more valuable. Given the current political climate, the industry needs to act now to revolutionise the way we treat and dispose of plastic waste to reverse the adverse environmental impacts.



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Plastics Recyclers Europe (PRE) is the professional representative body of plastics recyclers in Europe. PRE promotes plastics mechanical recycling and conditions that enable profitable and sustainable business, while offering a service platform to its members. Our members constitute 80% of the European recycling capacity, processing more than 3 million tonnes of collected plastics per year.

More information: Emilia Tarlowska emilia.tarlowska@plasticsrecyclers.eu | www.plasticsrecyclers.eu