



Background on the Recycling Crisis



You may have heard recycling is changing in Draper and that the items now accepted in your recycle bin have significantly changed. The enclosed “Big 3” flyer explains exactly what you can recycle: 1) corrugated cardboard, 2) rinsed plastic bottles and jugs with a neck, and 3) rinsed metal food and aluminum beverage cans.

Did you know Salt Lake County is not the only community impacted by recent recycling changes? The “recycling crisis” has created significant challenges for recycling programs across the United States and the world. So, how did we get here?

In the past, well-meaning “wishful recyclers” have incorrectly thought that most items were recyclable. In part, this misconception grew from the waste industry’s desire to facilitate a convenient process for recyclers. The previous message said, “Put it all in your bin. We’ll sort it later.” Unfortunately, this convenience turned problematic when recycling contamination levels increased. Recycling contamination happens when people place materials in the recycling bin that are not recyclable. In addition, the largest importer of recyclable materials from the United States said “no more.”

China was the largest consumer of recyclable materials generated in the United States but grew frustrated by high contamination in imported recycling bales. As a result, China announced its “National Sword” campaign in the summer of 2017. This initiative enforced a crackdown on imported waste and communicated China’s intent to ban most recyclable materials, including post-consumer plastic and mixed paper. It also included a new quality standard that prohibited contamination to 0.5%, which was significantly more stringent than the previously acceptable rate of 5%. Over the last year, the hits kept coming. In July 2018, China announced its plan to ban all imported recycled commodities by the end of 2018.

So where does this leave us? Unfortunately, the United States does not have enough domestic demand for recyclable materials to replace the volume China previously bought. Now the market is saturated with more recyclable material than our country can use. An important point to remember is that something can only be recycled if there is a demand for that material by a manufacturer to be turned into a new product for consumers to buy.

This seismic shift in the market caused significant ripple effects, including lost revenues, higher processing and capital costs for Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs), higher transportation costs, fewer outlets for materials, and increased stockpiling issues. MRFs (facilities that separate, bale, and market the recyclables you put in your bin) are now in a financial crisis. A reset is imperative to fix the contamination problem and help make recycling sustainable.

In Draper, we believe the solution is three-fold: 1) simplicity, 2) consistency, and 3) awareness. We are simplifying the recycling process by asking residents to only put the “Big 3” in their recycling bin. We are working with municipalities, haulers, and business partners to all follow the same guidelines across the county. Our plan is to raise awareness by publicizing the need to “Be Bright, Recycle Right” through an integrated public education campaign.

We know that this is a huge shift for our community and change will not come overnight. However, if we work together, we can make recycling better than it was before. **Be Bright and Recycle Right.**