

Failure of International Recycling Markets to Address Plastic Waste Problem

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Summary: Plastic recycling efforts in the United States have virtually stalled for lack of domestic or international market for plastic waste. At this time, steps to reduce plastic consumption are the only solutions available in Florida for addressing our plastic waste problems.

Recycling has been promoted as the ethical solution for plastics waste. Since only 9% of municipal plastic waste can be recycled domestically, international markets sustained municipal recycling programs.

Asian countries found they could not process our plastic either, and started refusing plastic trash from outside their borders. In 2020 China closed its borders to plastic waste from other countries. The United States responded by redirecting its plastic trash to less industrialized nations in Southeast Asia. In 2018, even before China's move, the United States exported 157,000 shipping containers containing half a million tons of plastic waste to Southeast Asian countries.

Like China, however, these nations were unprepared to process the flood of international plastic waste. For instance, Vietnam's Institute of Strategy and Policy on Natural Resources and Environment stated that only 8-12% of the plastic waste received could be processed in actual recycling plants. Vietnam announced that by 2025 it will ban all plastic waste imports due to the difficulties related to recycling plastic. Thailand and Malaysia are doing the same. Malaysia's environmental minister commented on the global recycling industry:

"Garbage is traded under the pretext of recycling, Malaysians are forced to suffer poor air quality due to open burning of plastics which leads to health hazard, polluted rivers, illegal landfills and a host of other related problems."

Lacking sufficient domestic or international markets for plastic waste, over 90% of plastic collected for recycling gets burned or put into a landfill. Plastics recycling is a noble goal, but it has largely failed to solve the plastic waste problem.

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