



DATE: October 28, 2020

TO: Waste Management Authority Board

FROM: Michelle Fay, Program Manager

SUBJECT: Recycling Transparency and Acceptability

SUMMARY

In 2018, China enacted its National Sword policy, effectively closing its doors as an export destination for most mixed recyclables, and subsequently sending the domestic recycling industry into a crisis. Even prior to National Sword, markets for lower quality materials such as plastics have dwindled, making it harder and sometimes cost prohibitive for processors to sell these materials. At the October 28 meeting, staff will provide an update on the status of recycling certain “tricky materials” within the county and discuss opportunities to reduce consumer confusion.

DISCUSSION

Changes in markets coupled with national headlines questioning the true recyclability of materials that the public has long been told to put in the recycling bin, have resulted in a new level of scrutiny around what is recyclable, and what happens to these materials after they leave the curb. With this lens, discussions in the recycling industry are increasingly focused on understanding the truth behind what happens to items like plastic clamshells, and how to best communicate with consumers to avoid “wish-cycling.” Consumer confusion leads to load contamination, and contamination leads to increased costs of sorting/processing and reduced markets.

Given this context, as well as the fact that many member agencies will be amending their franchise agreements to incorporate SB 1383 requirements, there are opportunities to begin moving toward clarity and transparency around what is being recycled and what goes in the landfill. StopWaste is exploring potential areas to support our member agencies in this work. These could include:

- Continuing to work with our Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) and Alameda County Service Providers Taskforce to identify areas of confusion around what is recycled, and encourage increased transparency and consistency in recycling acceptability lists.

- Promote the use of the Agency’s RE:Source app and online guide to help consumers with clear information on where to put materials.
- Supporting legislation that promotes waste reduction.
- Providing recommendations to the Statewide Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling.
- Continuing our work to advance upstream and circular economy solutions, which help eliminate waste at its source.

Staff will provide additional context for each of these potential focus areas at the October 28 Board meeting.

RECOMMENDATION

This item is for information only.