



We need a Sacramento Sword



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California has a lot of trash—roughly 2,200

pounds per person per year. And with 40 million people, that's more than 80 million tons of food, plastic, paper and other waste that needs to be recycled or disposed of every year.

Last week, at the 43rd annual California Resource Recovery Association convention in Palm Springs, I spent three days talking trash with 600 waste haulers, recyclers, CalRecycle officials and local government folks whose job it is to manage all of our garbage. This convention was part popular mechanics and part religious revival.

There are a lot of operational things required to move this waste, which includes tiny plastic containers but also bigger items such as mattresses and fallen trees. And there's a huge environmental impact to this work. The trash people do not get the respect and appreciation they deserve, but they know how important their work is, and what would happen if they were not around.

Last year, China decided, for all intents and purposes, to stop accepting our trash. This decision, commonly called China Sword, was a big focus at the convention. Previously about 40% of U.S. paper, plastics and other recyclables were going to China, allegedly to be recycled. China was even paying us for these materials.

The problem was that only about 25% of the "recycling" sent to China was actually recyclable, according to Mark Murray, head of Californians Against Waste. The rest was either contaminated or trash and was discarded— burned, buried or thrown in the river.

China Sword is an economic disaster for any business or government agency that was previously being paid for the recycling they collected. Now they have to pay to dispose of it. This is an 80 million ton question: What is California supposed to do with all this trash?

People at the convention were trying to figure out the answer.

While there was some discussion about which other countries might take our trash, the bigger and often emotional discussion was about how we as Americans, and especially as recyclers, participated in an international program that has been so damaging to the environment, especially the oceans. Much of the waste in China that was dumped into rivers eventually made its way to the ocean. The

photos of China's plastic recycling sites were shocking.

So, what now?

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Peter Slote, supervisor of the city of Oakland's Solid Waste/Recycling Program, says that what we are facing is an industrial policy and packaging crisis. The problem is what the manufacturers are producing. If the manufacturers had to be responsible for the proper disposal of their products and its packaging, they would

most likely change what they produce. We need an "American Sword." Just as China said "no" to our trash with their China Sword decision, we need to tell the manufacturers that times have changed. Certain non-recycleable products should just be banned. If you are going to sell your product in America, then you need to either make sure it is easily recyclable, correctly recycle or dispose of it yourself or provide municipalities' resources to do it for you.

Certain efforts, such as Senate Bill 54 and Assembly Bill 1080, which among other provisions, call for a phase-out of single-use plastics, would be an important first step. Alameda County has been a leader in similar efforts.

Let's implement a Sacramento County

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