

# Editorial: Why California recycling is a dumpster fire

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Mixed recycling awaits sorting at the Berkeley Recycling Center in February.

Back in 2012, the California Legislature declared it the policy of the state that by 2020, at least 75% of the state's waste would be reduced, recycled or composted. It was a bold legislative goal that turns out to have been a waste of the paper it was printed on.

Since the target was set eight years ago, the state's annual landfill disposal has grown steadily from about 40 million tons a year to nearly 50 million. The recycling, composting and reduction rate, meanwhile, fell from around 50% to 37%, or about half the rate lawmakers set out to achieve.

So notes the Statewide Commission on Recycling Markets and Curbside Recycling, a body of waste and recycling experts, officials and advocates assembled by the Legislature and Gov. Gavin Newsom in 2019 to "do what is nearly impossible," in the commissioners' words — namely, tell officials how the state can reach its receding goal by recycling and otherwise preventing twice as much of its garbage from ending up in landfills. While the commission's recently released first report is full of informed advice on how the state might approach that standard, it also serves as dispiriting notice that California, a state that purports to care more than most about recycling and other environmental matters, is producing ever more pounds of irredeemable trash per person.

As the commission's report also demonstrates, it's harder to catalog all that's wrong with recycling in California and the country than to enumerate our dwindling successes.

One of the heaviest blows to the effort in recent years came from China and other Asian nations that stopped accepting discarded plastic and other materials from wealthy countries such as the United States, much of which was unusable garbage falsely counted for domestic purposes as recycled. As of the new year, further such barriers to mixed plastic exports went into effect under an amendment to the Basel Convention, which restricts international waste shipments. That forces officials to contend with more waste that is unrecyclable in general or at least within California's borders, where state and local regulations can make it difficult to build and even maintain recycling facilities.

The pandemic has further aggravated recyclers' troubles by reducing the volume of commercial waste, which is generally more profitable to them, while increasing residential waste, which is priced at fixed rates and subject to more contamination that complicates repurposing. The threat of coronavirus outbreaks at recycling facilities, moreover, has kept some shuttered.

At its worst, California's waste crisis is not just figuratively but literally a dumpster fire. The recycling commission blames improperly discarded lithium-ion batteries and propane containers for a rash of garbage fires such as the one that did millions of dollars of damage to a Peninsula recycling center in 2016, shutting it down for months.

Such disasters are extreme examples of the broader problem with American waste management: Companies and individuals are rarely held accountable for the waste they generate and discard. Beverage companies mix bottle colors and materials at will, rendering containers that much more impervious to recycling. Plastic bags that are not only unrecyclable but notorious for shutting down recycling machinery, for example, are still stamped with recycling symbols and dutifully placed in blue bins along with all manner of other landfill-bound trash.

Around the globe, the most successful recycling efforts require more responsibility of manufacturers and consumers alike. Without that, California can consign its lofty goals to the bin of its choice.

*This commentary is from The Chronicle's editorial board. We invite you to express your views in a letter to the editor. Please submit your letter via our online form:*

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