



June 17, 2020

The Honorable John Barrasso
Chairman
Committee on Environment & Public Works
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Thomas Carper
Ranking Member
Committee on Environment & Public Works
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Barrasso and Ranking Member Carper:

The Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) appreciates the opportunity to provide this testimony to the Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee concerning the challenges facing recycling in the United States. [SWANA](#) is the largest professional association for the solid waste and recycling industry in the United States, with more than 10,000 members in 47 chapters. We are committed to advancing from solid waste management to resource management. Our members include both local government officials and private sector representatives.

This week marks three years since China announced its National Sword program, which has had a dramatic impact on recycling programs in the United States and elsewhere. Under National Sword, China has imposed significant restrictions on the import of recyclables and scrap. Because the United States about twenty-five percent of these recovered materials to China, nearly 17 million tons per year, local governments, recycling facilities, and scrap processors have been forced to find other markets for much of the paper, metal, and plastic that we recover from the waste stream. A lack of domestic processing facilities, along with other countries following China's lead in reducing imports of recyclables, have made this challenging.

Among the impacts of National Sword was a decrease in the value of recovered materials. With our largest export destination reducing its demand, prices for recovered paper and plastic declined. Prices leveled off in late 2019 and some commodity prices were increasing in early 2020, but the COVID-19 pandemic has had a very significant impact on the recycling supply chain, including pricing. The emergency orders issued by numerous states closing industrial and commercial facilities such as schools, offices, and stores meant that recovered paper generated at these locations was no longer available. This affects manufacturers who rely on recovered paper in their operations. For example, recovered office paper is a substantial source of feedstock for the manufacturing of toilet paper. If you're wondering why so many stores were out of [toilet paper](#) in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the disruption of the recycling supply chain was a major contributor.

At the same time, with many more Americans working from home, we have seen an increase in the volume of waste and recyclables generated from the residential side of the industry. Unfortunately, residential recyclables typically have a higher contamination rate than commercial recyclables. Contamination refers to non-recyclable material that is placed in a recycling bin, such as [plastic bags](#), [diapers](#), [holiday lights](#), or [bowling balls](#). One of the serious challenges that U.S. recycling programs and facilities face is the high level of contamination in the residential recycling stream, which increases costs and disrupts operations.

Because residential [waste and recyclable volumes spiked upwards](#) in March and April, some local governments temporarily suspended their curbside recycling collection programs to make sure that all of the trash was collected and managed properly. SWANA estimates that in late April, residential waste volumes peaked nationally at about twenty percent higher than normal, with some communities experiencing increases of more than thirty percent. This stressed many residential solid waste collection systems, although as businesses have started to reopen over the past month, we've seen a decline in volume on the residential side from the peak. As a result, most communities that suspended curbside recycling programs have reinstated them.

A second COVID impact was operational changes at recycling facilities. A typical modern recycling facility often includes workers working on either side of a conveyor belt picking materials off the belt. These workers are usually very close to each other. Our members have had to change processes, including installing plexiglass separators between employees or mandating social distancing, and providing additional personal protective equipment, which has increased costs. A handful of recycling facilities temporarily closed to make these changes, although most have reopened.

A third impact has been increased concerns by front-line recycling collection and processing workers about exposure to the COVID-19 from the materials they were collecting or processing. According to one [report](#), the virus can live on cardboard for up to twenty-four hours and on certain plastic and metal for up to three days. Recycling collection workers touch cardboard every day on their routes, as they place boxes from e-commerce and stores placed at the curb into the truck. SWANA has provided guidance to [employers](#), [employees](#), and the [general public](#) about steps they can take to reduce the potential for exposure, and although employers in the industry have provided gloves, facial coverings, and other personal protective equipment (PPE) to protect against exposure, these concerns [continue](#).

A fourth and final impact of COVID-19 has been a delay in Congress' consideration of legislation that would support American recycling programs and systems. This delay is entirely understandable, as the House and Senate have focused appropriately on responding both to the pandemic and the resulting adverse economic impact. In the months before COVID-19, several bills were introduced that would support recycling, including the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act, the RECOVER Act, the RECYCLE Act, and the Break Free from Plastic Pollution Act. In January 2020, Save Our Seas 2.0 was [approved unanimously](#) by the Senate, and awaits consideration in the House. SWANA strongly supports this bill, which in addition to addressing marine litter and

pollution, provides money to local governments and others for recycling education. SWANA also supports the RECOVER and RECYCLE Acts. With local governments under unprecedented budgetary pressure, federal support for municipal recycling programs is more important than ever. Just like roads and bridges, recycling is part of America's essential infrastructure, providing hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions in tax revenue, as well as protecting the environment and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

SWANA's work to help the industry overcome the current challenges facing recycling programs has continued despite the impact of COVID-19. For example, next week, SWANA is holding a [major technical conference](#) (virtually), and we have many sessions on recycling, including a [session](#) featuring EPA and industry leaders discussing both the challenges and opportunities our industry is facing. EPA will be providing an update on its [America Recycles](#) initiatives, including its work towards announcing new national recycling goals later this year. In November 2019, at its America Recycles Day Summit, EPA Administrator [Wheeler](#) announced that the agency would propose such goals in Fall 2020. We urge this Committee, Congress, and other stakeholders to hold the Agency to that commitment. National recycling goals will galvanize private investment in our recycling infrastructure and focus public attention on this important topic.

Finally, SWANA notes this is [National Waste and Recycling Workers week](#). This is a week in which the waste and recycling industry and local governments recognize the great work that these hard-working men and women do, every day, collecting and processing our trash and recyclables. SWANA urges all Americans to be thankful to waste and recycling workers for the amazing job they are doing keeping our communities and neighborhoods safe and clean, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a recent [letter to SWANA](#), Maryland Governor Larry Hogan, who chairs the National Governors Association, thanked both SWANA and "waste collectors, recyclers, drivers, engineers, technicians" and others who have provided the essential service of waste and recycling during the pandemic. We couldn't agree more. This Committee can support the remarkable work that these employees are doing by: (1) providing financial support to local recycling programs; (2) urging EPA to issue national recycling goals; and (3) making sure that America's recycling workers receive appropriate personal protective equipment and COVID-19 testing to they can safely continue to turn our discarded materials into new useful products.

SWANA appreciates the opportunity to provide this testimony, and looks forward to working with the Committee, EPA, and others to strengthen recycling in the United States. If you have any questions about recycling or the contents of this written testimony, please contact David Biderman, SWANA's Executive Director and CEO, at dbiderman@swana.org

Sincerely,



David Biderman
Executive Director & CEO
Solid Waste Association of North America