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The first materials accepted for curbside recycling had to be carefully sorted into their own bins. But source-separating was a barrier to recycling for many households.

Single-stream, or commingled, recycling became a common strategy for municipalities seeking to raise recycling rates. For nearly 20 years, it worked. But now, thanks to a change in Chinese policy, America's recycling facilities are in crisis.

Single-Stream System

With single-stream recycling, one bin containing all recyclables is collected at the curb and delivered to a materials recycling facility (MRF). There, a series of mechanical sorting mechanisms separate the recyclables into salable commodities — primarily paper and plastic. By 2017, roughly one-third of all U.S. recyclables were sold to China for further sorting and reuse. Further sorting is necessary because single-stream recycling contains contaminants — on average, 25 percent. MRFs can reduce contamination to about 5 percent. China is asking for better sorted, clean materials.

For years, China pushed for cleaner materials. Regulations were passed in 2006. In 2013, the Green Fence campaign attempted to enforce the earlier rules.

In 2017, China's National Sword campaign resulted in the blocking imports of mixed paper, post-consumer plastics, and vanadium slag. Chinese officials set a contamination limit of 0.5 percent on all other waste imports — effectively