

BRIEF

China hits Boise, ID again — first mixed plastics, now mixed paper

By **Cole Rosengren** • Feb. 15, 2018

Dive Brief:

- One month after Boise, ID decided to discontinue residential mixed plastic recycling, it is faced with the same question on mixed paper, as reported by the Idaho Statesman. Due to new contamination standards, the processing costs at Western Recycling's material recovery facility have risen. Boise now pays \$100,000 per month to recycle an average 640 tons of mixed paper.
- Public Works Director Steve Burgos presented the Boise City Council with two options on Feb. 13. The first would discontinue mixed paper recycling for 6-12 months until more stable markets could be identified. The second would raise monthly rates for residents by at least \$2, and possibly more in the future. Both options present educational and logistics challenges when factoring in the upcoming Hefty EnergyBag roll-out for mixed plastics.
- The council plans to revisit this decision in early March, and asked Burgos for more financial information on various possibilities. Switching back to source-separated collection to reduce contamination was one of them. "If that's why this is an issue, I'd agree that we should have this conversation," said Council President Lauren McLean during the council meeting. "It's something we probably want to look at."

Dive Insight:

Until recently, Boise's recycling programs were on an upward trajectory. Last June, the city launched a curbside organics program that has been so successful the local composting facility already needs funding for expansion. In July, the city was touting its 97% recycling participation rate and average 10% contamination as a model for others to follow.

Then China's import policies hit.

"The world as we knew it just a year ago has really completely changed on the recycling front," said Burgos.

After Republic Services stopped accepting 3-7 plastics in Southwest Idaho, Boise found a lifeline in the form of a \$50,000 grant to participate in the Hefty EnergyBag program. In the coming months, residents will have the option to send their mixed plastics and film to Renewology in Utah for conversion into fuel.

Yet that program won't be taking the 1-2 plastics that tend to get flattened and end up in the mixed paper stream as contamination. So if the city does keep accepting mixed paper, it would want to see bottles and clamshells come out of the single-stream bin. This could potentially mean asking residents to separate their plastics and other recyclables into three categories. Glass service is also available as an opt-in.

This would be quite a logistical undertaking. Further complicating the discussion is the fact that Boise's pricing arrangement with Western Recycling is based on volume, of which mixed paper comprises about 50%. If volume is reduced, overall pricing could go up. Sending 640 tons of mixed paper to the Ada County Landfill every month could also alter capacity projections and pricing.

Public works staff hope to align any decision on mixed paper with education around the Hefty EnergyBag program, even if that means a temporary delay in the roll-out. As for ditching single-stream after nearly a decade, all involved recognized it would be a major shift, but that it shouldn't be ruled out based on the unpredictability of international markets.

"We'd really like to find something that's a local, regional solution that gets us out of this cycle of those international markets that just seem to be so volatile," said Burgos.

Boise isn't alone on these issues in Idaho or among its West Coast neighbors. Burgos reported Seattle and San Jose, CA, have found success with new Southeast Asian markets, but don't view them as stable. Portland hasn't publicly recognized it has a problem like other Oregon municipalities, though will be hosting a four-hour state meeting on the topic Feb. 15.

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 Boise City Council

Feb. 13 Work Session [↗](#)