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Workers at a recycling plant in San Francisco. California lawmakers are currently considering ways to reduce plastic waste after the State was badly hit by the China ban.
Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

US plastic waste is causing environmental problems at home and abroad

Official data shows that the fallout from the China ban continues, with multi-million dollar American recycling industry facing crisis

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Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

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Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

05.10.2018

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US plastic waste exports to developing countries in south-east Asia rose dramatically in the first six months of this year, as the international fallout from [China's decision](#) to shut its doors to "[foreign trash](#)" continues.

Unearthed can reveal that plastic waste exports from the US to Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam shot up from January to June 2018. But with these southeast Asian countries moving to impose import restrictions and plastic scrap piling up from California to Florida, the US recycling industry is talking about a mounting crisis in the country.

China has historically been the world's biggest importer of plastic waste, taking in 45% of cumulative imports since 1992, according to [a study published this summer](#). The US sent around 70% of its plastic waste to China and Hong Kong last year. But Beijing's move to stop importing low quality plastic scrap has forced recyclers in the west to take a long look at their business model. In the UK, figures from the recycling industry have said the sector is "[lurching from crisis to crisis](#)".

US plastic scrap exports dropped by almost a third in the first six months of 2018, as waste firms struggled to find a home for their plastic scrap. From 949,789 metric tonnes (2017) to 666,760 metric tonnes (2018).

An analysis of trade data from the [US Census Bureau](#) found that other countries have accepted more plastic scrap.

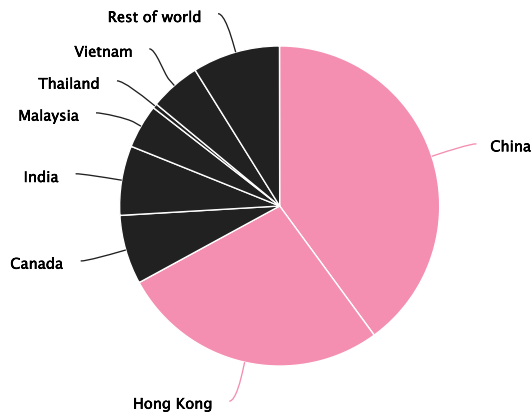
- In the first six months of 2017, a little over 4,000 metric tonnes of America's plastic went to Thailand, but the country took in 91,505 metric tonnes of America's scrap in the same period this year. That's an increase of 1,985%.
- Malaysia experienced a similar increase, a rise of 273% to 157,299 metric tonnes.
- Vietnam also saw a significant rise, to 71,220 metric tonnes in the first six months of this year.
- Exports to Turkey and South Korea also rose significantly in the same period, to 11,224 metric tonnes and 14,760 metric tonnes, respectively.
- Despite the China ban, Asia remains the main destination for American waste exports. In the first six months of this year, 81% of plastic waste exports from the US went to Asia, a 7% drop on 2017.

More on the global plastics crisis

- [Plastics crisis set to intensify as more countries look to restrict foreign waste](#)
- [China's plastic scrap ban threatens 'crisis' for UK recycling industry](#)
- [Recycling industry warned Defra 'the clock is ticking' on China plastics ban](#)

2017 January to June

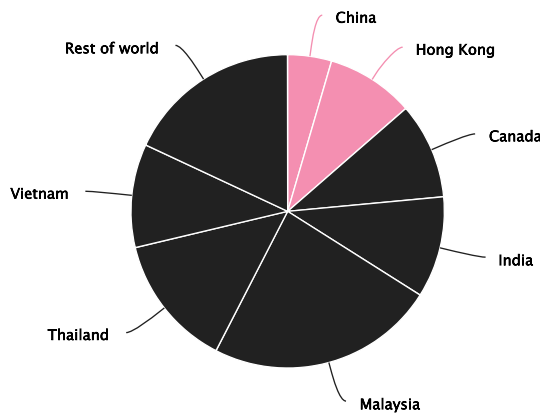
US plastic waste exports



Highcharts.com

2018 January to June

US plastic waste exports



Highcharts.com

Back where it came from

The influx of western rubbish into these countries has forced some to impose restrictions on waste imports.

Earlier this summer, plastic processing factories in Banting, south-west of Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur [were forced to close](#) because of residents complaining of air and water pollution.

The country's government [announced a new import tax](#) on plastic waste, last week. Malaysia is also [tightening requirements](#) on operating permits and is looking to clampdown on illegal processors.

In California, the environmental benefits of recycling now come with a cost

Restrictions have also been introduced in Vietnam. In May, authorities in the country announced a temporary ban on plastic and paper waste imports from the middle of this June until October. Two of the country's biggest ports – Tan Cang-Cai Mep International and Tan Cang-Cat Lai – have [reportedly become overwhelmed](#) with plastic and paper scrap since the China ban came into force.

In Thailand, the influx of trash forced the [government to introduce](#) [story in Thai] inspections of all plastics and electronic waste imports into the country. The country's authorities have also pledged to send waste back to where it came from if it's imported without proper description.

Experts are concerned that these increasingly popular destinations for US waste do not have the capacity to deal with waste in a safe or environmental way.

"Some of these countries just don't have the infrastructure in ports or roads to deal with an increase in volume of material," Robin Wiener, CEO of US trade body the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI), told *Unearthed*.

"Pop-up recyclers are trying to take advantage of these shifting markets but they are not doing it properly. They are not following industry standards when it comes to environmental, health, and safety practices."

A global crisis

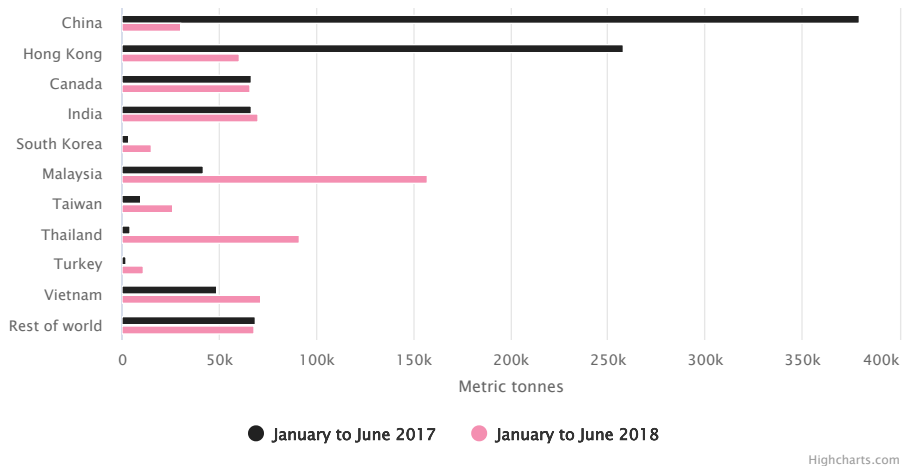
All of this poses an unprecedented challenge for American recyclers.

"We saw the writing on the wall," Brent Bell, VP of recycling at Waste Management, the biggest waste management firm in the US, told *Unearthed*. "The industry has to

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US plastic waste exports



Stockpiling has been occurring in California, now the [world's fifth largest economy](#), and a number of bills [are now being considered](#) to cut plastic waste.

Coastal cities have historically been more dependent on exporting waste to be recycled.

San Diego is [now facing](#) a potential \$1.1m annual charge from its waste contractor, which last year provided the city with a \$4m income stream.

“The environmental benefits of recycling now come with a cost that we haven’t seen in California before,” Zoe Heller, assistant director of policy development at CalRecycle, California’s state waste management agency, told *Unearthed*.

“What used to be a very profitable revenue stream is now becoming a cost.”

In towns and cities across the US, firms have been taking a variety of steps to deal with the backlog. Some have [suspended their recycling schemes](#), begun education [campaigns](#) or [refused to accept](#) certain types of plastic waste. Others have refused to pick up rubbish from outside houses, [sent recycling to landfill](#) or [burned it](#).

Residents may have to pick up the bill; one town in Vermont is soon to [start charging](#) residents for their recycling. Alternatively costs [could be passed](#) on through higher taxes.

In total, US plastic waste exports in the first six months of 2018 were worth \$270m, a drop of almost \$90m on the previous year.

Bell, from Waste Management, is clear about what he thinks needs to happen: “We have to encourage manufacturers to use a high proportion of recycled content in their products. And we have to make sure recycling is clean to begin with.

“There need to be more grants to help with upfront investments in manufacturing facilities so more companies can take recycled materials and make them into new products.”

This piece was also featured in [the Guardian](#).

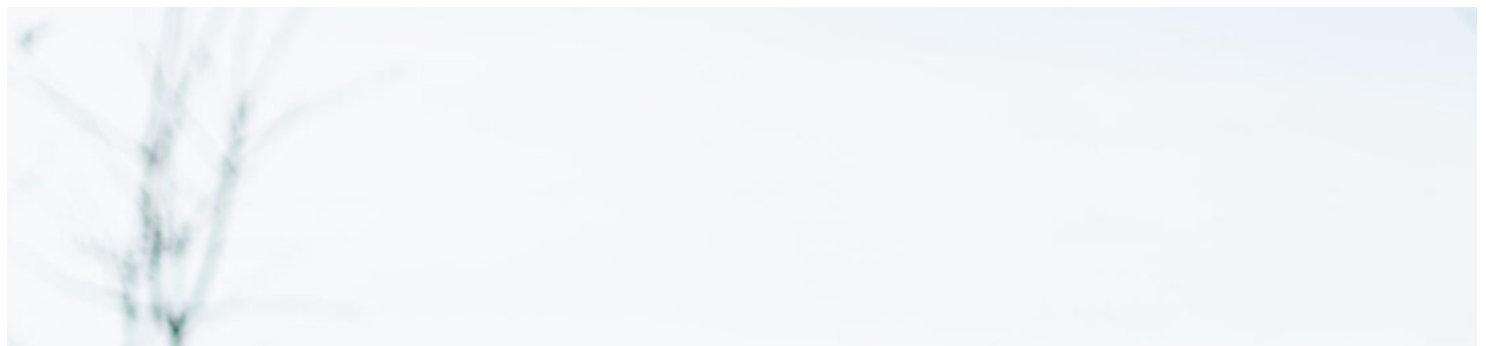
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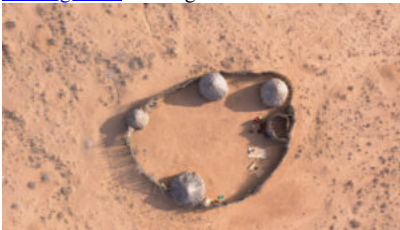
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