

One year after China promised to ban certain recyclables from import, North American recycling programs are making changes to what they'll accept. Glass and certain types of plastics are among the materials that will be sent to the landfill instead.

Bethel Park and Erie County, Pennsylvania; Candler County, Georgia; and St. Albert, Canada, are just a few places that have recently stopped collecting glass in their curbside programs.

In Georgia, Candler Recycling Center reports that glass and plastic recycling is "suspended" until the county can find a place to take these materials. The materials were previously sent to Bulloch County, which is no longer accepting glass or plastic.

St. Albert has also taken glass, to-go cups and single-serve plastic yogurt cups off the list of acceptable recyclables. The city notes changes in the global recycling market and contamination as the reasons.

"Global markets are no longer accepting as many recyclables, so we are making changes to our recycling programs," says Olivia Kwok, the city's supervisor for waste and diversion programs. "We are still working on our plans for glass. We do encourage residents to reuse glass bottles and jars for crafting and home storage."

Erie County relies on waste haulers and recyclers, such as Waste Management, to provide recycling services to residents and businesses within 38 municipalities. In January, Waste Management announced a ban on recycling plastic bags, says Brittany Prischak, the county's sustainability coordinator. Envelopes, junk mail, certain types of plastics and glass quickly followed as materials to be "phased out" of recycling programs.

"The removal of glass from the curbside and commercial recycling programs is not limited to Erie County," Prischak says. "This is happening across the state of Pennsylvania, as well as throughout the country. It has absolutely nothing to do with a lack of environmental consciousness at the recycling facilities."

Glass that is collected and sorted through curbside programs is "highly contaminated," making the materials "useless."

"Glass recycling companies do not usually want this glass," Prischak says. "In addition, broken glass can stick to paper and cardboard, contaminating those materials. And this has been an ongoing issue for a while. Only now, though, are they just removing it from the collection process."

Her goal with the county is to "reeducate residents as to what recycling actually means, how it works and what is truly recyclable and recoverable material." The list of what is currently still acceptable includes plastic bottles, newspaper, cardboard and metal cans.

"I am hopeful that this is a wake-up call to everyone that just because we want something to be recycled doesn't make it recyclable and that we can no longer use our recycling bins as an alternative to the landfill," she says.

Erie County is planning to work with local universities to research alternatives for glass recycling. Much of reclaimed glass can be ground into fine gravel for road construction and pavement projects, Prischak says

"We just need to look at the economics of creating a new collection program in our county and either consider processing it ourselves or transporting it directly to a glass processing company," she adds.