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THE EDITORIAL BOARD

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For more than a generation, we've been training ourselves to separate paper and plastic, to wash out emptied glass jars before pitching them into the recycle bin, to drag two cans to the curbside for garbage/recycle day pickup.

Now, some communities in every state, coast to coast, are trashing recycling programs, at least to some extent, according the Washington D.C.-based Waste Dive which covers and analyzes the national waste industry. From drop-off sites to curbside pickups, recycling programs are being dumped or diminished due to the double-whammy of a glut in recyclables combined with climbing costs of processing.

Simply put, there's little to no money being made in the industry right now.

But, when it comes to recycling, the discussion has to be as much about tomorrow as today.

The glut in the recyclables market results from a decision a year ago by China, the world's leading recyclables buyer, to enact a more stringent anti-pollution program. It now accepts only recyclables that are 99.5 percent "pure" — which means "uncontaminated." And because of the way we handle recyclables in the U.S., this standard has proved unattainable.

In the U.S. we use the single-stream method for collecting and disposing of recyclables; All recyclable materials are dropped into a single bin. Early efforts involved sorting cans and bottles, paper, plastic and metal — a process considered at the time by many to be too cumbersome. Now the only necessary separation is recyclables versus trash.

This is more convenient, so convenient it led us to become sloppy about the rules.

Recycling bins are often contaminated with not-quite-clean glass jars (they're supposed to be fully rinsed), with grease-soaked cardboard pizza boxes (only clean cardboard can be recycled), and with actual contraband like old shoes, paint cans, and plastic bags (unacceptable in all circumstances).

This "contamination" instantly transforms potentially marketable materials into garbage that has to be rerouted from the recycling processing plant to the landfill because the cost of sifting the trash from the treasure exceeds the value of the treasure.

In other words, just as one bad apple spoils the barrel, one blue bin of contaminated recyclables can ruin the truckload.

As things stand, there's little to no money being made from the processing of recyclables.

Our market-driven, profit-seeking society has responded with cuts to and curtailing of recycling efforts. In Ohio, the Athens-Hocking Recycling Center has stopped accepting plastic film; Akron has raised curbside rates; Cleveland has levied contamination fines. In Pennsylvania, residents of South Hills communities near Pittsburgh are being told to put their glass in the trash.

It doesn't have to be this way.

Mitch Hedlund, executive director of the nonprofit advocacy group, Recycle Across America, says that recycling can be made profitable if it is done right. His organization advocates for standardized labeling of recycling bins — visual cues that would be clearly understood by the public. She likens them to traffic signs that are consistent from town to town, state to state. The theory has been tested and proven as workable.

Rhode Island made this change in 2016. Working with Recycle Across America, buy-in came from all corners of the tiny state: school districts and universities to government offices and private businesses. Before the new initiative, more than half of all the recyclables that reached the state's recycling plant was contaminated. That amount has dropped by 20 percent so far, Ms. Hedlund says.

Standardized labeling could easily be adopted across the country. Over the time, the public's response would be Pavlovian: Blue can equals recyclables. Pictures on blue can equal the kinds of materials to put inside.

Until then, the mantra should be this: "When in doubt, throw it out." Better to set more trash at the curb than to corrupt any recyclables container, which then corrupts a truckload. "Recycling is only unprofitable because people are throwing garbage in recycling bins and it's costly to pull it out," says Ms. Hedlund.

Moreover, today offers the opportunity to protect tomorrow. Today we can begin to create demand for and profit from an enterprise that turns the useless into something useful, curbing the real threat of resource depletion. Recycling is still the right thing to do. We just have to be smarter about it.