



TESTIMONY TO THE WORKGROUP ON WASTE REDUCTION AND RECYCLING OF THE MARYLAND HOUSE OF DELEGATES' ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE

BY: Phil Bresee, Board of Directors of the Maryland Recycling Network

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Good Morning Waste Reduction and Recycling Workgroup Members:

My name is Phil Bresee, and I'm speaking on behalf of the Maryland Recycling Network, or MRN, an advocacy organization whose membership includes representatives from county and city recycling programs, recyclables processors, collectors and end-users, non-profits, environmentalists, and concerned citizens. Founded in 1990, we work to promote sustainable materials management, including the three "R's" of reduction, reuse and recycling, through educational programs, technical assistance, and advocacy. It is on that last point – advocacy – in which we have communicated with the ENT Committee in the recent past, providing comments and levels of support on a number of bills from the 2020 session including House Bill 1452, which concerns recycling market development. We have appreciated those and previous opportunities to share our views and appreciate the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Because there is overlap among the testimony from today's panelists, I'm going to focus on just a few key areas. But first, I do want to acknowledge that these have been challenging and transformative times for recycling across the U.S., including here in Maryland. Virtually all programs have been impacted by the recovered materials import restrictions imposed by the Republic of China in early 2018. These restrictions have had a profound impact on materials demand and have driven recyclables into a deep pricing slump that continues to this day.

At the same time, the composition and makeup of the solid waste stream continues to evolve with less paper due to digital media, more cardboard due to on-line purchasing, and more plastics resulting from packaging redesign and light weighting. Food waste now represents the largest fraction of the solid waste stream in many jurisdictions. These changes present numerous



challenges for recycling, and have implications for processing and end-markets infrastructure, citizen awareness, and public policy goals.

Accordingly, we'd like to use our time today to address those critical issues:

Recycling Market Development and Infrastructure: As China's National Sword made clear, we have neglected our domestic recovered materials end-use infrastructure for far too long. There are encouraging signs in our region, with recovered paper mills poised to come on-line in Pennsylvania and Virginia, and new glass and plastics recycling plants in Pennsylvania. However, we need to do our part to attract secondary processors and end-users to Maryland to ensure continued capacity for our recyclables, and to unlock the job-creation benefits that recycling offers.

Market development is especially important if local governments are expected to achieve high-diversion, or zero waste goals. Markets were never robust for many of the materials targeted by Maryland programs, #3-7 plastics being a case in point. Many of these markets have since vanished since China's National Sword.

Processing Technology: The typical Materials Recovery Facility, or MRF, in operation today was designed to process and sort a vintage recyclables stream. As the waste and recyclables streams evolve it will be important for MRFs to continue to innovate and upgrade with new technologies. Indeed, advances in artificial intelligence, robotic sorting, and optical sorting systems are already showing positive results in many facilities.

Education and Behavior Change: Ensuring that people recycle correctly is especially important today given the demands for cleaner recyclables. But even the most savvy and best-intentioned recyclers can be confused by the changing materials stream, misleading labels on packaging, and program differences from one state or county to the next. Resources are needed to design and implement outreach and education programs that inform on what is recyclable, how those materials should be prepared, and that provide feedback to recyclers. And while we've done



a pretty good job at creating a “recycling culture” in single-family neighborhoods, there is still much work to be done in apartments, condominiums, and businesses.

Realistic Policy Goals: When setting goals, we believe policy makers should consider a range of metrics to measure results, but with appreciation for the realities of recycling market access, infrastructure, and citizen behavior. The recycling rate goal that serves as the key metric in Maryland and most other states is outmoded and ignores the environmental impacts of recycling and other waste management approaches. It also fails to tell the full story of how effective a jurisdiction’s recycling and waste reduction programs are.

During the past 10 years, many cities and counties around the U.S. have adopted zero waste goals. While MRN does not have positions on the definition of zero waste, whether those goals should only be considered aspirational, or what should count towards zero waste, the reality is that no city or county has come close to achieving it. What’s more, I think it’s safe to say that the challenges brought about by China’s National Sword have only served to underscore how challenging achieving zero waste is.

Again, MRN appreciates this opportunity to provide input to the work group. We hope that today represents the start of a series of conversations about how to address the challenges surrounding recycling and waste reduction today. This concludes my testimony and I’m happy to answer questions from work group members.