

Policy Process Summary: China Refuses Plastic Waste Imports

Problem: After helping fuel China's economy for decades, a growing domestic environmental crisis forced the central party to address the mountains of waste the country imported worldwide.

Policy Maker: The Chinese national government was the sole policy actor in formulating and implementing this policy, specifically the Ministry of Ecology and Environment and the National Development and Reform Commission.

Agenda Setting: Imports of plastic waste for recycling provided Chinese manufacturers with a cheap supply of materials over decades of exponential growth. The growing environmental impacts of processing massive quantities of plastic waste, illustrated and humanized in internationally distributed documentaries such as "Plastic China" (Zhao, 2017), along with a decline in the quality of waste that was being imported (Katz, 2019), forced the government to reintroduce the matter on its policy agenda, after the previous 2013 "Green Fence" waste import inspection program was deemed ineffective (Perchard, 2017).

Formulation: Authorities considered maintaining the previous "Green Fence" policy of minimal enforcement. This policy had helped supply the country's manufacturing base with material and was therefore not without merit (Perchard, 2017). In formulating more restrictive potential actions, the ministry weighed banning a wide array of materials and whether to move forward with outright bans or restrictions on the quantity and quality of imported plastic waste.

Adoption: In February 2017, the Ecology and Environment Ministry announced the decision to ban fourteen types of waste from importation to mainland China, including a 95.5% purity standard that served as a de facto ban on waste plastic shipments (California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, 2020).

Implementation: This policy entered implementation in January 2018 alongside a 35 billion dollar investment by the National Development and Reform Commission to improve China's own domestic waste handling issues as part of a multi-agency package of environmental measures known as "National Sword". Action was swift, with increased inspections, shipping delays, and arrests at nine major ports (Toloken, 2017). Internationally, plastic exporters found themselves with their biggest importer gone and began to flood developing nations with plastic waste shipments.

Evaluation: The National Sword policy, as implemented, succeeded in effectively ending foreign plastic waste imports via an intensive inspection and enforcement regime (Crawford & Warren, 2020). However, the impact of the policy was felt far outside China's borders. A world that had long grown accustomed to exporting nearly half of its plastic waste to China suddenly had to adjust (Katz, 2019). Across the US and Europe, recycling programs found themselves without a buyer for much of their material stream and had to scale down or discontinue municipal collection (Javorsky, 2019). Turned away by Chinese ports, plastic recycling shipments began to flood nearby Southeast Asian countries, who found themselves unprepared to receive such a deluge (Katz, 2019). The immediate impact, while improving China's domestic waste management, simultaneously set back global plastic recycling programs and negatively impacted other countries in the region. Since the introduction of National Sword, nations and industries have begun to respond. Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, and several other Southeast Asian countries have banned or announced their own bans on plastic waste imports (Hook & Reed, 2018). Plastic exporting countries are also starting to respond with policies

intended to reduce plastic waste contamination, educate consumers, and spur innovation in domestic recycling technologies (Javorsky, 2019). The international repercussions from China's response to a domestic environmental issue continue to reverberate through policy-making worldwide.

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