County MUA: Rigid plastics, shredded paper now trash

By RACHEL SHUBIN/Special to the Sentinel | Posted: Wednesday, August 21, 2019 11:26 am

WEST CAPE MAY — As overseas markets disappear, recycling is changing and not for the better.

Cape May County Municipal Utilities Authority (MUA) Executive Director Joseph Rizzuto gave a presentation to Borough Council on the continual changes affecting recycling during a meeting Aug. 14.

Recycling is at a crossroads due to contamination and the changing marketplace, Rizzuto said. Contamination in the recycling program happens when the wrong materials are placed into the recycling stream, or the right materials prepared in the wrong way. The MUA puts an emphasis on a "back-to-basics" approach in its public outreach.

Recyclables are the largest United States export item by volume. Recycling does not create an economic or environmental benefit until sold as commodities and manufactured into the product, Rizzuto said. By recycling nonrecyclable materials, users increase contamination.

"The recycling industry created the myth that recycling is free," Rizzuto said. "End market revenues cover the costs of the products."

In 2017, China passed a "National Sword" program in which packaged recycling was heavily scrutinized for contamination and commodity market prices dropped.

"Other markets were explored but were not able to make up the loss of the China market," Rizzuto said. "As of Aug. 31, India is banning all scrap plastics."

He said waste streams are now stressing municipal recycling facilities. In 2016, New Jersey generated 9.7 million tons of solid municipal waste; of the amount of waste, 4.26 million tons were recycled.

"Cape May County generated 90,047 tons of municipal waste in 2018 and 28,604 tons was redirected out of landfills into recycling," Rizzuto said.

As of Oct. 1, shredded paper will be disposed of as trash in the borough of West Cape May. Shredded paper is a "designated" material, one that is easily and successfully recycled and technology exists to be recycled. But shredded paper often breaks loose of the plastic bag and becomes contamination in the recycling stream.

"When the shredded paper enters the disposal vehicle, the bag can become damaged and intermingled within the stream and becomes contamination," Rizzuto said. "Shredded paper can get into glass, which gives us a warning we have to clean up the stream."

Other items not considered recyclable in Cape May County include mixed rigid plastic and bulky rigid plastic, which are hard or rigid items, not flexible plastics.

"These items are expensive to collect and process," Rizzuto said. "An example of items include coolers with Styrofoam inside, wheelbarrows and toy electric cars."

In West Cape May, 800 pounds of bulky or mixed rigid plastics was collected in 2017; 480 pounds was collected in 2018 and 60 pounds collected in 2019 to date, per Rizzuto.

"Rigid plastics and shredded paper are going to take a hiatus from the program and we will revisit it annually," Rizzuto said. "We have a national consultant from the industry coming in to look at all of our recycling

commodities and our process."

The pushback the MUA has received from its recycling contractor contributed toward the decision of the shredded paper and rigid plastics being considered trash.

"Solid Waste Program Manager John Conturo gives tours at the plant and spreads our educational message of going back to basics," Rizzuto said. "Bottles, jugs, jars and containers without the lids. We want them empty, clean and dry. Keep them loose and do not put them in a plastic bag. All of this helps us reduce our contamination."

The MUA developed a Waste Wizard App to help the community determine if their items are recycling or trash.

"The takeaway is China is going to ban all recovered materials by 2020," Rizzuto said. "Development of domestic markets or new technology are being reviewed such as paper pulping. We will continue to evolve and react to changes."