

Recycling is in trouble – and it might be your fault

By Paul Singer, USA Today

ELKRIDGE, Md. – If you are recycling at home, you are probably doing it wrong.

That is why a worker lunged to grab a garden hose off the conveyor belt at a Waste Management recycling facility here Wednesday before it got caught in a giant sorting machine. Such tangles frequently require the plant to stop the waste processing line and clean out the jaws by hand.

“Our contamination changes by the season,” said Mike Taylor, the company’s director of recycling operations here. Since it’s spring, the facility is getting a lot of garden hoses. Around the holidays, they get broken strands of Christmas lights, another choking hazard for the sorting line. And all day every day there are plastic shopping bags (recyclable at a grocery store but not from a household), chunks of styrofoam, diapers, syringes, food-contaminated containers ... a nearly endless litany of things that residents throw into their curbside recycling carts figuring they are or ought to be recyclable. One worker grabs the remnants of a screen door off the sorting line while another snags a wire rack from a DIY shelving unit.

Many cities around the country will celebrate the 47th Earth Day on Saturday by highlighting their recycling programs, but the industry is grappling with a dual threat: The value of recovered waste products has plummeted over the past five years, and the amount of effort required to extract them has risen.

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