

Recycled rubbish worth zero



SINKING IN RUBBISH: A woman works in a Beijing recycling centre sorting plastic products. PICTURE: Reuters

The global downturn means that the bottom has fallen out of the recycling market. **Lewis Smith** looks at the implications.

Thousands of tonnes of rubbish collected from household recycling bins may have to be stored in warehouses and former military bases to save them from being dumped after a collapse in prices.

Collection companies and councils are running out of space to store paper, plastic bottles and steel cans because prices are so low that the materials cannot be shifted.

Collections of mixed plastics, mixed paper and steel reached record levels in the northern summer but the bottom fell out of the market and they are now worthless.

The plunge in prices was caused by a sudden fall in demand for recycled materials, especially from China, as

manufacturers reduced their output in line with the global economic downturn.

British local authorities and collection companies are so concerned about the mountains of paper, plastic bottles and cans that they are having to store that they have called for storage regulations to be eased.

Officials from the Environment Agency, Environment, Food and Rural Affairs departments are considering changing the regulations on the storage of recycled waste and are expected to issue new guidelines this week.

They have been urged to relax the rules limiting the quantity of waste that can be stored and to allow it to be kept in secure warehouses or abandoned military bases and former

airfields.

Steve Eminton, of letsrecycle.com, said: "Warehouses around Britain could start to be filled with waste paper, metal and plastic bottles."

"There's nowhere for these materials to go at the moment. It's rapidly becoming a very serious problem."

He said that mountains of plastic bottles, paper and steel cans were likely to build up by the end of the year and that the problem would be exacerbated by the Christmas festivities, when a surge of packaging materials and drinks containers would fill recycling bins.

The speed at which prices collapsed has taken the recycling industry and local authorities by surprise and has been made worse because recycling rates are at record levels.

Jane Kennedy, the environment minister, announced last week that more than 90 per cent of local authorities were meeting or exceeding their household recycling targets.

Stuart Foster of Recoup,

which advises on plastic recycling, said that mixed plastics had slumped from about £200 (NZ\$532) a tonne to the point of worthlessness in only four weeks. He was confident, however, that the low value would be temporary.

Mr Foster urged officials to be flexible on the regulations and said that with sensible management plastic, paper and steel could be stored safely until prices rose.

Staff at Waste Resources Action Programme (Wrap) and the Local Government Association have begun investigating the extent of the problem.

A spokesman for the Local Government Association said the credit crunch had caused prices to fall in the materials market and this potentially had implications for councils.

Steve Creed, of Wrap, said: "We think the current extremely low prices are likely to be temporary."

"Recovered materials are still a valuable resource. They have undergone similar price volatility in the past."

— Britain's The Times

Species spotting



New Zealand dotterel (*Haradrius obscurus*) Tuturiwhatu

This shorebird, pictured, is unique to New Zealand and is classified as threatened with a worldwide population of 1500 birds. There are two isolated populations, one breeding on Stewart Island and the northern species is found on the top half of the North Island. The Coromandel peninsula beaches have had significant population increases since human minders have attended to these natives. The population on the west coast which extends from Port Waikato down to Marokopa has fallen as low as 20 birds; however, predator control and fencing of nesting sites are now carried out in some areas. There are reports of successful rearing of single birds so there is a strong possibility of a gradual increase in this geographically isolated population. With a lifespan of 25 years every successfully raised chick is a significant increase in the population.

Studies by the Conservation Department have found ways to protect and encourage the successful raising of dotterels. People supervising the nesting site and carrying out predator control by trapping and fencing of the nest sites are part of the active management.

This ground-nesting bird is vulnerable to dogs, cats, hedgehogs, mustelids, harriers and human disturbance. Usual nesting sites are at the high tide mark. This bird returns to breed in the same area each year and the young will often return to their birth place to begin their breeding.

The most important thing any beachgoer can do is stay well away from any nest and keep dogs on a lead. The breeding season is September to February; therefore walking below the high tide mark during this time would allow the birds to be undisturbed. The chick is able to walk soon after hatching. This is necessary as the parent does not feed it but escorts it down the beach to the water edge to find food. The egg hatches after four weeks and it is another five weeks before the chick can fly.

Contributed by Waikato Biodiversity Forum, phone 0800 246 348.

My toms would relish fruits of real Garden Place Christmas tree



Jeff Neems
Eco Worrier

Lindsay and Caroline's pesky bamboo took an absolutely hiding last month after I baulked at the price of garden stakes.

As we perused the aisles of our local hardware store, I reeled in horror at the prospect of paying \$6 for 10 bits of bamboo to support our tomato plants. Worse still, the resource-intensive plastic stakes (totally non-biodegradable, by my assessment) were even more

expensive, and thus completely ruled out.

So after a quick exchange of text messages, it was off to Tamahere to see Lindsay and Caroline, whose property houses some fine examples of bamboo which they — and their neighbour — were more than happy for me to chop down, declaring it a pest plant. Since New Zealand is home to no giant pandas, I had no problems removing it, and the extensive size options mean the expansive tomato crop we're expecting won't see the plants keel over under the weight of their fruit.

As deep house music from New York pulsed from the car stereo and the spring sun shone

down, I did my best Rambo impression, sawing and hacking down the bamboo to various lengths, trimming off the leaves and piling it in the back of the car. I felt very manly, and managed to avoid injuring myself with my array of tools.

When it comes to garden stakes, bamboo is among the most environmentally friendly options. It's hard-wearing, genuinely sustainable, and, er, green... well, greenish, until the colour fades and it goes an underwhelming shade of pale brown. But should our new stakes eventually crumple, several tomato crops down the track, I'm safe in the knowledge they will eventually biodegrade.

The same, however, cannot be said for the artificial Christmas tree the Hamilton City Council plans to plonk in Garden Place over the festive season.

I'm told this 25m artificial tree will be made of plastic and steel materials. A *Waikato Times* report in October noted it would be imported from China — so much for "Buy New Zealand made" — China being the same nation where "recycling" of our plastic exposes workers earning \$2 a day to toxic fumes. While ratepayers won't be picking up the \$135,000 bill for the tree — it's going to be "sponsored" — if the tree comes a cropper, then in effect they will. Okay, we

might be able to re-use some of the metal or aluminium, but it's the plastic that's going to be hardest to dispose of. Yes yes, we can allegedly recycle it, but that's only partially solving the problem. If a plastic bottle takes 250 years to break down in the sea, how long will it take those little bits of fake tree to biodegrade — 500 years? 1000 years?

Your guess is as good as mine. And since various plastics contain carcinogens and dioxins, it's not as if biodegradation or recycling are decent options anyway. (Annually, every New Zealander sends 50kg of plastic to landfill.)

So, at the risk of riling up the council (my employees, since I'm a ratepayer), I'm going to advocate a revolutionary idea — that it ditches the artificial tree and goes for something more genuine. I'm talking a proper, natural Christmas tree. And, come January, when there's no use for the tree for another 11 months, it could be chopped up for firewood (which would be made freely available to hard-working rate-paying firewood-collecting households), and the lesser parts of the branches chipped for composting.

Compost which, of course, I can use in my garden to help with next year's bamboo-fortified tomato crop.

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