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Tariffs on Plate Metal Squeeze Litho Printers to the Limit

Aluminum isn't gold, but years of import duties on the raw material for lithographic plates are starting to make it seem almost as costly to printers who use those plates in production.

By Patrick Henry

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(Adobe Stock)

If a scheduled increase on the tariff for imported aluminum goes into effect on March 12, 2025, it will only be the icing on a large and increasingly hard-to-

swallow cake for the offset lithographic segment of the printing industry.

The layer cake of import duties on aluminum has been rising for years as successive Presidential administrations have tried to shield the domestic economy against what they have deemed unfair trading practices by foreign manufacturers of many different kinds of products.

But some of the upward pressure on prices has come from a commercial rivalry among litho plate suppliers to the U.S. printing market—a confrontation that led the Department of Commerce to announce steep increases on duties for Chinese- and Japanese-made aluminum litho plates last year.

The U.S. has been obliged to import all of the plate-grade aluminum it uses since 2018, when the last domestic producer of the material exited the market. The import duties on aluminum have gone hand-in-hand with tariffs on imported steel, another metal whose U.S. producers the government justifies protecting on the grounds of national security.

Cross-Border Controversies

The country's main foreign source of both metals is Canada, which supplies half of the aluminum that the U.S. imports. Canada also exports most of its steel products to its southern neighbor.

Those partnerships began to fray in 2018, when the first Trump administration used tariffs on aluminum and steel as leverage in its push to negotiate a new trade agreement with Canada and Mexico. The metal tariffs—25% on steel and 10% on aluminum—applied to all countries that exported aluminum, steel, and some of their derivative products to the U.S.

By 2020, the duties on Canadian and Mexican imports had been lifted, reimposed, and lifted again

as the two nations came to the agreement that the Trump administration wanted.

Although the metal tariffs, classified under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, remained in place during the Biden administration, countries affected by them could secure exemptions by voluntarily limiting the volume of their exports. Domestically, the two leading suppliers to the U.S. plate market, Kodak and Fujifilm, obtained tariff exclusions on their imports of aluminum plate material.

However, in 2024, the Biden administration ratcheted up the pressure on China—the primary target of the Trump sanctions—by increasing tariffs on products containing aluminum and steel smelted in China but exported to the U.S. through third countries such as Mexico. (The ruling also applied to metal originating in Russia, Belarus, and Iran).

The Biden administration further penalized Chinese aluminum and steel products by including them in a list of items slated for increased tariffs under the Trade Expansion Act's Section 301.

Back with a Vengeance

The second Trump administration turned up the pressure worldwide by announcing on February 10, 2025, that the 25% tariff on steel would be reinstated and that the 10% levy on aluminum would be raised to 25%. The ruling, set to go into effect on March 12, also terminates all existing exemptions and makes every importer liable to tariffs on aluminum and steel it obtains from foreign sources.

Whatever the ruling's effect on plate prices turns out to be, it may be just a footnote to a much larger increase driven not by the government's zeal to protect manufacturers, but by one manufacturer's focus on protecting itself.

This was the essence of Kodak's 2023 petition to the Department of Commerce for relief from what it said was unfair price competition from litho plate manufacturers in China and Japan.

Kodak, the only remaining litho plate manufacturer in the U.S., alleged that printing plates imported from these countries are dumped for sale in the United States for less than normal value and that their manufacture is unfairly subsidized.

In October 2024, the United States International Trade Commission (USITC) voted in support of Kodak's contention that a U.S. industry was being "materially injured" by these practices.

Responding to USITC's determination, the Commerce Department calculated a 91.83% anti-dumping duty (AD) on plates imported from Japan and a combined anti-dumping and countervailing duty (CVD) of 151.51% on plates coming from China. (A countervailing duty seeks to offset subsidies that foreign governments give to their manufacturers in forms such as direct cash payments, tax credits, and below-market-rate loans.)

Fujifilm, one of the suppliers named in Kodak's petition, protested the additional tariffs and their likely effect on the U.S. market for litho plates. Kodak, Fujifilm said, "is the only entity that benefits from these duties, at the expense of the entire printing plate market and the American businesses that rely on printing plates."

Reticence and Apprehension

Such is the fraught state of the tariff-burdened litho plate market as the March 12 deadline for the latest round of import duties on aluminum draws near. Neither Kodak, Fujifilm, nor ECO3 (whose owners acquired the plate and prepress business of Agfa

Offset Solutions in 2023) would comment for this article on the Trump administration's decrees.

The litho plate-using printing industry, however, sees nothing but added expense and supply-chain woes ahead as the tariff makes its ill effects felt.

Ford Bowers, President and CEO of PRINTING United Alliance, says that one of his printer members expects his annual plate spend to jump from \$70,000 to \$170,000 as a result of the AD and CVD penalties calculated by the Commerce Department last year. Another 25% after March 12 would bring the yearly plate bill to \$212,000—an unsustainable burden for the business, according to Bowers.

The added cost is “either going to really eat into his profits, which means fewer people are going to be employed, or he has to pass it on, which means less printing will be purchased,” says Bowers, a former print company executive. “It’s a distortion, and it is going to be a special burden to commercial printers who use a lot of aluminum plates.”

He adds that because of the market pressures imposed by tariffs, “the supply of plates is also a problem. Not just the cost. I think that supply is now also considered possibly a bottleneck.”

“Potential to Devastate”

PRINTING United Alliance was one of 11 organizations that formed a cross-industry coalition last year to protest the AD and CVD duties on aluminum litho plates imported from Japan and China. In a statement to the USITC, the coalition warned that the duties “have the potential to devastate entire industry segments, increase costs for businesses and their customers, jeopardize jobs, limit supply, and threaten the viability of many American small businesses.”

“Excessive duties on plate imports will increase costs on printers, publishers, and other customers of printed product, who, in turn, will be forced to pass those costs on to their customers,” the statement said.

Thayer Long is CEO of the Association for Print Technologies (APTech), a trade group of which WhatTheyThink is an independent subsidiary. He notes that the industry has been dealing with issues around printing plates and aluminum for years—and that a “significant artificial adjustment” in pricing has been the result of the wrangling between U.S. and foreign plate manufacturers.

“It’s disappointing when you’re seeing situations like this arise where you’ve got to have some type of government invention, right or wrong,” he says. “It’s just disappointing that the industry isn’t able to work that out.”

The Print & Graphic Communications Association, which represents printers in six states and Washington, D.C., sees duties on aluminum and plates as a part of a larger picture of the economic damage that tariffs can do.

“The recently announced 25 percent tariff on steel and aluminum imports, along with existing and proposed tariffs on Canadian and Chinese goods, will have a severe financial impact on our industry by increasing the costs of critical materials like aluminum lithographic printing plates, pulp, and paper,” said Tim Freeman, President of PGCA, in a statement.

Beware Retaliation

“The retaliatory tariffs from Canada, which could target \$2 billion in U.S. pulp and paper products, would further destabilize an already fragile supply chain,” Freeman observed. “Given that Canada supplies 80 percent of North America’s newsprint and a significant portion of pulp for packaging, these tariffs

could lead to higher prices, potential shortages, and increased financial strain on print service providers and packaging companies.”

Long similarly puts plate and aluminum tariffs in the context of the increasingly high cost of doing business in the printing industry.

“We've been operating in a high inflationary environment for so many years,” he observes. “I'm also concerned about the tariffs on pulp and paper coming from Canada.” While he doesn't foresee a rise in plate prices driving down print volume by itself, “I do think it will impact profit.”

The problem with this, he continues, is that “a printer or a manufacturer is only going to be able to eat into their margins for so long. It's already a very competitive industry. So these costs ultimately will get passed over to the consumer.”

That added cost “is just another excuse for somebody to not print,” Long says. “The concern is that you're now going to disincentivize consumers from purchasing products that involve printing plates, paper, or packaging.”

Trickle-Down Trouble

Lori Anderson, President and CEO of the International Sign Association (ISA), says her group also worries about the downstream downsides of broadly based tariffs because of their potential “to disrupt the supply chain and cause significant financial and sourcing instability throughout the sign and graphics industry.”

“We also know that these types of disruptions have a trickle-down effect, with new businesses unable to open or advertise their location,” Anderson says.

Aluminum tariffs will be on an agenda of issues that PRINTING United Alliance intends to present on Capitol Hill during a “fly-in” visit with lawmakers in

May. “We’re going to bring 40 or 45 printers with us,” Bowers says. The objective will be “to let the legislators know that this is actually pretty damaging for us as a community.”

But one problem with addressing the aluminum tariffs, Bowers points out, is that “this isn’t being driven by legislators. This is being driven by the administration, and to get them to listen is an entirely different kind of exercise. The climate right now is that they’re not asking for feedback. We don’t lobby the executive branch, so it’s little harder to cross that bridge.”

Price of Politicization

Another complication, according to Bowers, is that at the present moment, tariffs are being used for more than just securing fair trade balances. Things like halting immigration and stemming the flow of fentanyl across borders are being advanced as justifications for the duties as well.

This piling on of issues makes tariffs “very difficult to speak to politically,” Bowers observes. “When so many different reasons are cited, it makes it very difficult to construct an argument.”

He says printers are planning for the “disruptions” that the latest round of aluminum tariffs are likely to bring to the litho plate market.

“Secure your supply as early as you can and get your name in the queue if you don’t have a ready supply, because we simply don’t know what’s going to happen,” he advises. “I’m hoping March 12th comes and goes and that something gets rolled back or kicked down the road a little bit further so people have more time to respond. But you just never know.”

About Patrick Henry

Patrick Henry is a journalist and an educator who has covered the graphic communications industry since 1984. The author of many hundreds of articles on business trends and technological developments in graphic communications, he has been published in most of the leading trade media in the field. He also has taught graphic communications as an adjunct lecturer for New York University and New York City College of Technology. The holder of numerous awards for industry service and education, Henry is currently the managing director of Liberty or Death Communications, a content consultancy.

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