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Think plastic bags are a hassle? Ask a recycler

Ubiquitous trash downgrades materials and clogs machinery

BY KATE GAWF

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If you routinely assuage your recycling conscience by tossing everything even remotely recyclable into your curbside bins, you might in fact be the source of huge recycling problems — especially if one of the items you toss in is plastic bags.

Just because you toss something into your yellow bins does not mean it will find its way to reincarnation and evade the landfill. Residential curbside recycling goes one way, other kinds of recycling go another.

When recycling is picked up from the curb, it goes to a sorting facility. Far West Fibers has four such facilities in the Portland area, equipped with state-of-the-art sorting and screening machinery that works quite well — except when it's clogged by plastic bags.

For curbside recycling to work, the public needs to know three rules, says Jeff Murray, Far West Fibers' vice president of business development. He says Portland-area residents are doing pretty well with the first two.

Rules run from trash to glass

Rule No. 1, Murray says, is don't put garbage in with your recycling.

It contaminates the recyclables, and some unfortunate human being has to pull out both the garbage and the recyclables, and throw out the whole mess.

Rule No. 2 is, don't put glass in with other materials. Glass should be completely separated from everything else, and placed on the curb in its own bin. If you run out of bins, you can put glass in a bucket or some other rigid plastic container, which the haulers will leave behind.

You can put all other recyclables directly into the bins, without bagging them. Plastic bottles, tin cans and paper can go together. If you're worried



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At a Far West Fibers sorting facility, about a quarter of workers' time goes toward taking plastic bags out of the sort line and the machinery.

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about paper blowing away, you can put it in a paper bag in the bin.

Rule No. 3 is more problematic: Don't put plastic bags in with your curbside recycling. This is the one that Oregonians aren't doing so well with, and it's causing problems at the sorting facilities. "Plastic bags thrown into the curbside bins are currently our biggest actual challenge," Murray says.

"Don't do it," concurs Metro's recycling hot line supervisor, Judie Miller. "There are other ways to recycle plastic bags of all kinds, but curbside is not it. Many grocers and recycling depots take them."

Plastic bags never belong

Well-intentioned people sometimes sort their recycling by separating the items into plastic bags. Even those relatively few bags are enough to wreak havoc.

"There's no need to put recyclables in plastic bags," Murray says. He explains the confusion: People see their neighbors doing it, or they try it and notice that haulers take it away. Then they think it must be OK. If the hauler takes it, it's a mistake, Murray says.

Plastic bags gum up the sorting equipment. Workers at the start of the sort line pull out unwanted matter but aren't able to catch it all before the mix of materials moves onto a conveyor belt.

The materials travel over a platform of wheels with hard rubber fingers on them. The larger recyclables pass over the tops of the wheels and the smaller things drop through.

Hundreds and hundreds of these wheels move the materials along, and if the human sorters don't manage to grab all the plastic bags at the initial presort area, the bags wrap around the big wheels. "There are multiple reasons why that's bad," Murray explains.

"One, you get too many bags wrapped up in there and after a while it starts affecting the shafts' movement, and that can burn up your motors," he says. "Two, as the plastic wraps up around the wheels, all that plastic clogs up that space between them. So pretty soon, the little stuff can't drop through, and the conveyor belt comes out of the screening with way too much other stuff mixed into it."

Standing by the last section of the sort line are human sorters whose job it is to pull out the few things that the wheels miss. When too many plastic bags are stuck in the wheels, the sorters are inundated because the equipment's not doing its job.

"Once the system starts clogging up," Murray says, "not only are we trying to pull those plastic bags out, we now have to pull out by hand the materials that are normally separated mechanically. ... Now we have plastic water bottles going to the paper mill."

Ultimately, the quality of the recyclables that Far West Fibers passes on — paper to paper mills, plastic to plastic reproprocessors, etc. — goes down in quality as the number of misplaced plastic bags goes up.

Word gets back to Murray. "So you get recycling advocates and government people upset because 'Why can't we sort better?' And our comment is, 'You get the bags out, we can,'" he says. "We estimate that 25 to 30 percent of our labor is spent pulling those bags out along that sort line. And that's material that shouldn't be in there in the first place."

"Oregon already has the highest recycling rate in the nation," says the recycling hot line's Miller. "Reducing contamination of materials that reach

recycling facilities improves the quality of what goes to market. Recyclers have a better product to offer. So anything we can do to make recyclables more marketable, such as cleaning up this plastic bag problem, will help.”

Find out more

Metro recycling information hot line: 503-234-3000. Metro’s Web site, www.metro-region.org, also contains a wealth of information about recycling.

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