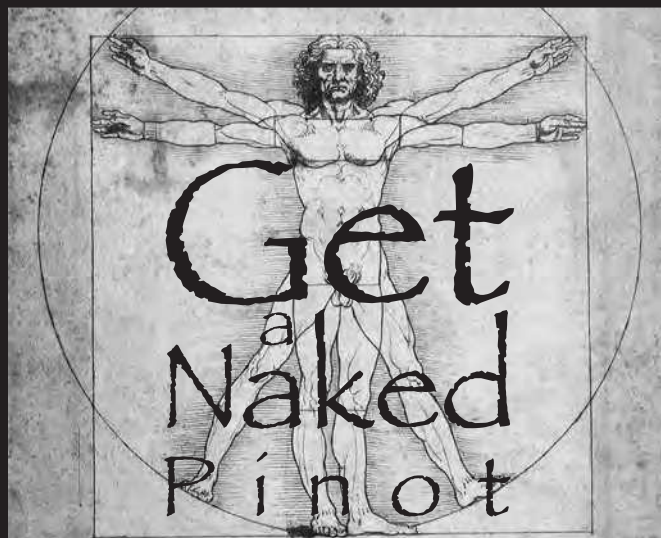




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Trashed Recycling

Is commingling making recycling a waste?

Think all that recycling you sort out of your trash and roll out to the street in a giant bin gets recycled? It might, or it might not.

More than 850 tons of plastic and metal put out by Portland households in August got trashed. A sorting company, Smurfit-Stone Container, allegedly threw all that recycling out, *The Oregonian* reported this past week.

The big diversion of recyclables to the landfill raises questions about Eugene and the state's increasing move to a system of commingled recycling and its reliance on a largely unregulated sorting industry.

"It's definitely a black eye and I think there's definitely some explaining that needs to be done," says Alex Cuyler, the city of Eugene's recycling analyst and chairman of the Association of Oregon Recyclers. The news about Smurfit could worsen public mistrust of the city's new commingled recycling system, he said. "Already people are asking is this stuff really being recycled."

Eugene haulers truck local commingled recycling to SP Newsprint near Portland. Cuyler says he has visited the facility and it looks good. There's a state law against trashing recycling. But neither city nor state officials regularly inspect, regulate or audit sorting facilities to independently verify how much of the recyclables that the facilities receive actually get recycled rather than dumped.

"It's one of these issues DEQ is looking at," Cuyler says of tighter regulations. But he adds, "they are kind of understaffed, underfunded."

It's unclear what, if any, economic incentive the recycling sorters have to go to the expense of actually sorting all the recyclables rather than creaming off the most valuable or convenient materials and trashing the rest. Many of the sorters, including Smurfit and SP Newsprint, are arms of paper mills that likely value the paper in commingled recycling more than the plastic and metal.

"They will say outright our bread and butter is in paper fibers," Cuyler says.

Even when the sorters aren't cheating like Smurfit, a lot of recycling ends up in the trash. Two years ago, Metro, the Portland regional government, studied recycling sorters in its area. The study found that 45 percent of the material the sorters were throwing out as garbage was actually recyclable. One sorter's trash was 70 percent recyclable. That sorter, part of a paper mill, was throwing away anything in a brown paper bag because the mill didn't want that kind of brown fiber.

Some sorters fail to separate some plastic,

glass and metal recyclables and instead bail them up with paper and send them off to paper mills. The mills screen out the contaminants in the pulping process and then throw out the once recyclable material.

Cuyler says he visited one Longview, Wash., mill that reported going from five tons of garbage a year to 35 tons after it started taking fiber from commingled recycling sorters.

Some of the mixed-in plastic ends up as pollution. Environmentalists in Georgia have threatened a SP Newsprint mill there with a lawsuit for spewing plastic bits from commingled fiber out into a river.

In all, Metro estimates that about 14 percent of the plastic and metal containers sent to sorting facilities don't end up recycled.

In addition, plastic and metal is often shipped overseas by state processors where it's difficult to verify what actually happens to the material.

Mills have complained that glass contamination is particularly troublesome. The shards are difficult to screen out without also wasting

lots of fiber. Glass can also cause rips in paper during printing, angering mill customers and wasting more reams of paper.

But Cuyler says any problems with commingling are outweighed by its benefits. Eugene residents recycle 30 percent more because commingling is easier, and haulers save money with simplified collection.

"There are still some bugs that need to be worked out," Cuyler says, but, "it's still showing to be a net gain in the total amount of stuff being recycled."

Passing an expanded Oregon Bottle Bill could address some of the problems by keeping many plastic containers out of the mix, Cuyler says.

Metro reported that only one percent of all the recycling sent to sorters was trashed. But that figure was apparently based on unverified information supplied by the sorting companies themselves. In Smurfit's case, DEQ says they were throwing out much more recycling.

The lack of sorter regulation could shake public confidence in recycling, a source of environmental pride for Oregonians where recycling rates are almost twice the national average.

BRING Recycling's Operations Manager Damien Czech says he's always been skeptical of the big curbside commingling bins. Sorting recycling is difficult and "you get kind of suspicious when big quantities get mixed together," Czech says. "I got a feeling that a lot of it was being thrown away."

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