

Rejected by China, more recyclables head to landfills

Too contaminated for shipment

By CASSANDRA PROFITTA
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Over the past year, more than 10,000 tons of Oregon's recycling have been dumped in landfills because there was nowhere else for them to go.

It's one of the consequences of new restrictions on shipping recyclables to China.

Across the Northwest, more and more places are raising recycling fees, reducing and even canceling curbside collection and sending formerly recyclable material to the dump.

Last year, the world's biggest buyer of recyclables announced a tough new set of rules for how clean its recycling imports need to be as part of a policy called National Sword, which aims to reduce pollution.

Since January, the Chinese government is only allowing recycling imports with 0.5 percent contamination or less. That means there can be virtually no plastic mixed in with the paper recycling, no food waste left in plastic containers and no garbage in the recycling.

U.S. recycling companies say they can't meet that standard — in part because there's too much trash mixed in with the recycling they're picking up at the curb. Prohibited items such as Styrofoam, diapers, garden hoses, plastic bags and coffee cups still show up in curbside recycling bins far too often.

Peter Spendelow, natural resource specialist at the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, said there



Rogue Waste System's Scott Fowler, left, and Laura Leebrick, center, have nowhere to send about 2,000 tons of baled and stacked commingled recycling.

used to be Chinese buyers who would accept highly contaminated loads of recycling from the U.S. and sort through it themselves. But the Chinese government has put an end to that practice.

"Countries don't want to be a dumping ground for a rest of the world," he said.

With fewer buyers for U.S. recyclables, many companies have asked the state of Oregon for permission to dump the excess in landfills. Some places have limited the items they will accept in curbside bins to things they know they can sell while others have suspended curbside recycling altogether.

Recycling companies have

found some new buyers in other countries, but those countries might not be able to handle the volume that China once took.

"The situation is still fairly dire," Spendelow said. "There aren't a whole lot of markets for mixed plastics."

Nowhere to go

So far, many places, including Portland, are still collecting the same curbside recycling items they always have — even though some of that material has nowhere to go but landfills.

"We want to keep collecting it so that when markets come back and they are able to move this material

they don't have to re-educate everyone on how to do it," Spendelow said. "But we can only make that argument for so long."

The Department of Environmental Quality is still approving landfill disposal of recycling that doesn't have a market, but the agency might not allow that to continue much longer.

A new committee of recycling leaders across Oregon is meeting regularly to discuss possible solutions and long-term changes to the state's recycling systems, such as restricting the kinds of materials that can go in curbside recycling bins, separating paper from plastic at the curb,

improving sorting capabilities at recycling facilities or ticketing people for their recycling mistakes.

In Clackamas County, officials have started placing "oops" tags on recycling bins with the wrong materials in them.

In March, Rogue Disposal & Recycling in Medford slashed its list of what's recyclable to just four items after stockpiling and dumping thousands of tons of unwanted paper, plastic and glass.

The company did an audit of the material they were collecting in curbside recycling bins and found nearly a quarter of it didn't belong there.

"Twenty-four percent of

those recycling carts was filled with trash — stuff that has never been recyclable," said company spokeswoman Laura Leebrick. "We were rolling along thinking everything was fine because nothing was getting rejected. We didn't realize how much garbage was in there."

Rising rates

Portland just raised garbage collection rates \$2.55 per month in large part to cover the added costs of recycling.

Bruce Walker, recycling program manager for Portland, said recycling companies used to make some money by selling recyclable materials, and that would offset the cost of curbside collection. Now, they're paying companies to take recyclable materials more than it would cost to send them to the landfill.

"They get an invoice instead of getting a check," Walker said. "This is the first time ever the numbers have gone so far above the cost of landfilling. No one expected it to get this bad."

The latest study found about 9 percent of what Portlanders put in their recycling bins is actually trash. Reducing that contamination rate could help recycling companies find new buyers for the city's recyclables.

"Clearly, we need to do a better job of reaching out to the public to remind people that getting creative with recycling is not helping," Walker said. "Wanting to recycle is a good thing, but putting things that don't belong there only adds to the program costs. Somebody has to remove that plastic cup you put in there and throw it away. It still goes to the landfill."

Astoria schools see some improvement in attendance

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

The Astoria School District saw chronic absenteeism drop by more than 8 percent in the first year of its Strive for Five attendance campaign.

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing more than 10 days of school in a year. Strive for Five challenged students to not miss more than five days, an untracked aspirational goal.

More than one-quarter of Astoria students were chronically absent in 2016-17, compared to less than 17.7 percent this past school year. Nearly 20 percent of Oregon students were chronically absent in 2016-17.

John Jacob Astor Elementary School recorded the biggest drop, going from more than one-quarter of students chronically absent in 2016-17 to 13.6 percent last school year, the lowest among the district's four campuses. Kate Gohr, principal at Astor, said parents are starting to understand the importance of kindergarten and how it isn't the same as when they were in school.

"I still have many kids — to me, many — who are missing 30 days, 33 days," Gohr said. "That is so many days, and most of them are academically

at-risk."

More than 14 percent of kindergartners were still chronically absent.

Melissa Linder, the school district's curriculum director, said the district should focus more on kindergarten attendance because of the correlation with graduation.

Superintendent Craig Hoppes said the school district has also found a clear correlation between kindergarten attendance, assessment scores and reading skills at third grade. Reading at grade level by third grade correlates heavily with future academic success.

There's still a lot the district can do to improve, Hoppes said. Astoria High School, where more than 28 percent of students were chronically absent in 2016-17, still recorded more than one-quarter of students missing more than 10 days a year. Astoria Middle School was at 17.1 percent, and Lewis and Clark Elementary at 14.6 percent.

"At the elementary level, it's an adult concern, a parent concern," he said. "At the middle school, it could be both. At the high school, it's more of a kid concern."

Lowering absenteeism is a lengthy process, Hoppes said, and the school district's goal is

to have each school under 10 percent of students chronically absent.

The Astoria School Board on Wednesday also approved a \$20 million operating budget, including nearly \$11.7 million for construction, \$7.3 million in student supports and \$700,000 in reserve.

The budget accounts for a 1.5 wage increase, two more contract days and improved benefits for teachers and administrators.

County to pave over 3 miles of roads

By JACK HEFFERNAN
The Daily Astorian

Portions of several Clatsop County roads will undergo paving this summer.

A total of 3 miles along Ridge Road, DeLaura Beach Lane, Walluski Loop, Abbott Road, and Kylester Lane will be repaved. Bayview Transit Mix Inc. received a \$524,105 contract — approved unanimously

Wednesday by county commissioners — to perform the project.

Work is expected to be completed by September.

In other business Wednesday, commissioners:

- Adopted changes to county Planning Commission bylaws. Meetings will no longer be required to start at 10 a.m. or finish by 5 p.m.

- Hosted a presentation of the Government Finance Officers Association's annual financial

report award to the county Budget and Finance Department. The award is based on the efficiency and readability of the county's annual budget report.

The county earned the award for the second consecutive year.

"This is a significant undertaking. They're my workhorses, and I can't do this without them," Budget and Finance Director Monica Steele said in front of the department's three other staff members.

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