

SNAPSHOT Curbside Recycling - 25th Anniversary

Where does my recycling go?

Rodd Pemble, Recycling Manager, SSC

Bellingham's upcoming 25th anniversary of curbside recycling July 1st reminds me of my parents and grandparents, who lived through the *first* Great Depression and World War II. They were thrifty, saving tin cans, glass bottles, and newspapers. During the war, citizens collected scrap metal and cans to make armaments, and newspapers to wrap the ammunition for shipping overseas. As a boy, I remember canning lids and rings screwed to the ceiling above my Grampa's work bench, a jelly jar hanging under each one full of screws, nuts, and bolts.

Today, Sanitary Service Company (SSC) and Nooksack Valley Disposal (NVD) provide sorted curbside collection at Whatcom County homes and businesses, churches and schools, government offices and parks. We divert more of the waste stream annually to recycling, but is the curbside sorting we do at home and work worth the effort, compared to "single-stream" programs in other communities, where all recycling goes in one container? Secondly, where do all those materials really go?

I first called Marty Kuljis, general manager of Northwest Recycling (www.nwrecycling.com) in Bellingham. Northwest Recycling started collecting and selling recyclables, mostly metals, in 1923. Today, they process all the curbside recycling materials collected in Whatcom County. They sort the can/glass/plastic mix, and bale the commodities, which are then sold to brokers and end users in the United States and beyond. Marty answered my first question, pointing out that local recyclables have less than 1% contamination, while single-stream programs often have 9-15% or higher rates of contamination, leading to higher customer costs and thousands of tons of resources going to the landfill. Your sorting at the curb matters, a lot. With Marty's help, I started tracking the answer to the second question – where does all our recycling go?

We all love fresh fruit from Wenatchee, America's fruit capital. What you may not know is that the soft blue paper tray that kept your apple or peach safe, from the packing plant to your local grocery store, was made from the recycled newspapers we picked up at your house or business weeks before. Josh Weldy, CFO of Keyes Packaging Group in Wenatchee (www.keyespackaging.com), told me, "The contamination levels are significantly lower with Northwest Recycling bales. We see a considerable amount of contaminants in single-stream supplier bales – plastic, metal, and glass. The quality of these Northwest Recycling bales is superior to single-stream grades purchased from other suppliers." In other words, keep up the great sorting job Whatcom County, and Josh might add, eat more apples!

Aluminum cans are an amazing package, with up to 65% recycled content, and saving an estimated 17 million barrels of oil nationally through recycling as recently as 2010. Yet despite American's best recycling efforts, four out of ten cans still end up in the garbage, a tremendous waste of energy and resources. Whatcom County aluminum cans are baled and sold to Anheuser-Busch Corporation (www.anheuser-busch.com) to be made back into new beverage cans. Denise Burrell of Anheuser-Busch told me that our cans go to Muscle Shoals, Alabama where Wise Alloys melts them into aluminum sheet to be made back into new cans, filled and back on grocery shelves in just 60 days.



Glass bottles and jars travel by truck to Strategic Materials in Seattle, where the glass is sorted by color – amber (brown), green, and flint (clear). Dennis Hinson of Strategic Materials (www.strategicmaterials.com) explained that his plant is located right next door to Saint-Gobain, which smelts glass to make new bottles and jars, minimizing expensive glass hauling, often an obstacle to glass recycling. Hinson said the key thing people can do is keep out contaminants like ceramics, plate glass, and broken mirrors. They melt at a different temperature than bottle glass, causing enormous (and expensive) problems at the mill.

Bales of corrugated cardboard are hauled to Longview, WA, the home of KapStone Paper & Packaging Corporation (www.KapStonePaper.com). Jan Cleiland is the Recycled Fiber Manager at KapStone, and she really likes our boxes - “Marty’s material is pretty much guaranteed a home here, it’s so clean and dependable.” KapStone makes containerboard, which is used to manufacture new cardboard boxes, and kraft paper for paper grocery sacks. When I asked what residents and businesses could do to help cardboard recycling, Jan said remove tape and any plastic or foam packing from the boxes.

What happens to the empty cereal boxes and junk mail you recycle? Susan Choi, Regional Vice President for America Chung Nam (www.acni.cnet) smiled at me across the dais at the recent Washington State Recycling Association Conference – “You’re one of the only curb sorted programs left in the state, aren’t you? Your paper is so clean, we wish more programs would think about going back to more curb sorted material.” America Chung Nam is a subsidiary of China’s Nine Dragons Paper, Ltd, the world’s largest recycled paper manufacturer, and one of the most environmentally responsible as well – they buy our mixed paper and reprocess it into linerboard and coated paper products used to make packaging for consumer goods. Susan noted that keeping contaminants like plastic bags and wrappers out of the paper is important to ensuring that what you put in your curbside bin actually **gets** recycled.

Speaking of plastic, plastic containers hold everything from shampoo to milk these days, and are made back into many different products from ski wear insulation and carpeting to decking and picnic tables. Currently, Pralumex, Inc in Walnut, California brokers our curbside plastics to manufacturers of injection molded products – toys, housewares, and parts for small appliances. Luke Loekman of Pralumex echoed a familiar theme when he described Whatcom recyclables as “better quality, less contamination.” He added, “The (broken) glass mixed in single-stream collection is a serious safety hazard to the mills.” One more example of why your careful sorting in Whatcom County results in greater economic benefits and safer workplaces down the line.

Scrap metal has been recycled for millennia, from Bronze Age spear points to the modern steel can of tomato soup or peaches. Your empty cans, stripped of their paper labels (recycle with scrap paper!), and any general scrap metal you set out beside your curbside bin is baled and delivered to Schnitzer Steel in Tacoma (www.schnitzersteel.com), to be shredded. The shredded metals are mixed at the Nucor Steel mill in Seattle (www.nucor.com) where Safety & Environmental Manager Bart Kale described a recipe for rebar - shredded cans, shredded automobiles, some washers and dryers, a “salt & pepper” of alloys on top, and voila - brand new, 100% recycled content rebar for home and business construction.

Last but not least, we collect used motor oil curbside from residential customers, over 17,652 gallons in 2013 alone. ThermoFluids (www.thermofluids.com) in Sumner, WA picks up the used oil and re-refines it into various products – new spec motor oil, lube oil, and fuels. Motor oil just gets dirty, and can be re-refined over and over, saving millions of gallons of resources and the pollution required to extract them.

Now that you know the rest of the story, there’s really only one thing left to say – thanks for all your help over the last 25 years to make Whatcom County’s recycling program one of the nation’s best, and keep on sorting!

About Sanitary Service Company (SSC)

Established in 1929, SSC is Whatcom County's largest recycling and garbage collection service provider, serving 45,000 + customers from Bellingham to Blaine and beyond. SSC was named 2012 *Green Business of the Year* by the Bellingham/Whatcom Chamber and is a sustaining member of Sustainable Connections, Toward Zero Waste Founding Pioneer, 100% Green Power Leader, 5-Star EnviroStar business and Whatcom Smart Trips employer.

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