



Recycle right, waste not

China's contamination rule could impact Oregon recycling

Beth Casper Special to Salem Statesman Journal
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The Mid-Valley Garbage and Recycling Association promotes recycling among the eight Marion County waste haulers.

Its efforts include printing on recycled paper, educating residential and commercial customers about recyclable products, and providing a hotline for any recycling questions.

These practices have meant that the association is EarthWISE certified. The EarthWISE program is a free business environmental assistance program of Marion County. EarthWISE staff helps businesses recycle, save energy, reduce waste and much more. To earn certification, a business meets criteria in six areas. There are more than 170 EarthWISE businesses and organizations in Marion County.

See RECYCLE, Page 2F





Leann Fast drops off her recyclable materials at the Mid-Valley Garbage & Recycling depot. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

Recycle

Continued from Page 1F

The association's EarthWISE practices include increasing recycling participation rates. And it has — Marion County has had one of the highest recycling rates in the entire state for many years.

But new regulations from China are hampering the association's efforts to continue that trend.

China used to take bales of recyclables for minimal transportation costs from the United States and hire Chinese workers to sort the materials. Because they sorted the material to find the marketable recyclables, it didn't matter as much if the recyclables had a bit of trash mixed with them.

"The West Coast has benefitted from shipping containers going back to China empty — our materials could be sent there cheaply," said David Lear, general manager at the Mid-Valley Garbage and Recycling Association. "But China has closed many air-polluting factories that took our recyclables to clean up its own pollution issues. The result is that China is saying, 'We are done taking America's garbage.'"

What it means is that the blue carts that hold commingled recycling need to be trash-free.

The companies in the United States that take these recyclables do not have the ability to sort out non-recyclables and China will only accept shipments with less than 1 percent contamination.

The biggest contaminants are glass, plastic bags, hoses and ropes, diapers, and clothing or other textiles.



Used construction wood is ground up as hog fuel to be converted into boilers to produce energy. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

"Everyone is trying to do the right thing and recycle more," said Jamie Pederson, controller at the Marion Recycling Center. "But these contaminants cause a lot of problems within the recycling system."

Glass can break and pieces can get caught in bales of paper. Plastic bags, hoses and ropes can get caught in recycling sorting conveyor belts and cause the entire system to halt until the contaminant is removed.

"Everyone thinks garden hoses are recyclable because they are green or rope because it is a natural material, but they aren't," Pederson said.

Diapers are the fourth largest contaminant in Marion County. The plastic is not recyclable and any fecal matter poses health risks to workers.

As for clothing, any bales of recyclables that are contaminated with textiles is automatically rejected by China. Recycling advocates encourage residents to donate usable clothing, towels and other

textiles to nonprofits that can resell it. Ripped or stained textiles can be donated to organizations that rescue animals, such as humane societies.

"We have a 1 percent contamination threshold to get to," Lear said. "If we can get there, we will have an overseas market — China will still take it."

If contamination levels remain high, recycling may become more expensive in the future or loads of contaminated recyclables would have to be landfilled.

"We appreciate anything we can do to keep Oregon green," Lear said. "We are the number one recycling county in the state. We are looking for all the constituents of Marion County to step up and keep us in that leadership role."

More information about the Mid-Valley Garbage and Recycling Association can be found at www.mrtrashrecycles.com. To learn more about the EarthWISE program, go to www.mcEarthWISE.net or call 503-365-3188.