

Column Nov. 27, 2013. Editor's Headline: "Answers to those nagging questions about recycling"

"More than eighty percent of what goes into the trash is recyclable."

So says Dennis Pino, Director of City of Cheyenne's Sanitation Department, who has worked hard to change the statistic. "Reduce, reuse, recycle," is his mantra.

He's had a measure of success, for which he gained kudos from legislators and Public Works alike, but he aims for more. "There is so much out there," he says, "so much that can be reused. It's a shame to throw away something that's of value in another form."

Mr. Pino has begun to target restaurants, businesses, and stores, for which the department will provide the containers. Collection fees are used to pay the employees and finance the infrastructure that gets the material to market.

Recycling clean cardboard, junk mail, and office paper is particularly effective. Because dead trees from beetle kill can't be used for paper products, the price has been going up for these commodities; hence, recycled paper and cardboard, too, have become more valuable.

As board member of Solid Waste and Recycling Association, Mr. Pino educates school children, business owners, and consumers at large, including legislators. Consequently, state interest has risen in the programs he oversees and expands. Over the years, awareness has grown of recycling's importance to the state. Cities like Sheridan now truck their recyclables to the same Colorado facility that Cheyenne uses.

"Often, children and teenagers are more willing to recycle than their parents," he notes. "They understand the need to preserve our environment for their future."

No plastic bags should go into curbside recycling; ditto, no styrofoam, no glass, no light bulbs or mirrors, no hazardous material like paint, motor oil, or batteries. Indeed, hazardous waste should not go into the trash, either, for it will contaminate landfills with traces of heavy metals. Mr. Pino's transfer station employs a task force that will accept and process hazardous waste. CFL light bulbs and batteries are accepted at places like Lowe's and Home Depot, while grocery stores offer bins where consumers may recycle their plastic shopping bags.

Here's why he wants no glass: the shards contaminate the loads, which are baled and shipped to the Colorado facility. There, each bale is split open and its contents sorted. "I've lost entire bales when a motor-oil container split open," he says. "People assume that, because it's recyclable, they may place it in curb-side."

An accomplishment of which Mr. Pino is especially proud: Cheyenne's compost facility, which has become so successful, "cities all over are emulating it," he says. For example, since grinding up the beetle-killed trees destroys the larva still residing in the dead wood, the material can be used as wood chips. Yard waste is collected curbside; however, residents may also drop off tree

limbs and other large yard waste free of charge. They may purchase quantities of enriched garden soil at substantially lower costs than commercially packaged soil.

He emphasizes that collecting and marketing clean stuff is desirable from the standpoint of his program and urges us to rinse milk and cottage cheese containers: “You needn’t waste the rinse water. It’s good for your houseplants.”

But you the consumer may wonder: what of the child-proof shampoo container that can’t be rinsed, the salad-dressing bottles that resist cleaning, the plastic-tube toothpaste that retains traces of its contents? All these bear the “please recycle” triangle, so you toss them into the corresponding container, right? Then you wonder: what about it?

According to Adam Minter, these recyclables are shipped to China, where they are rinsed with acid and melted into reusable material. Why China? Because the country sends huge amounts of stuff to the U.S., in those gigantic containers you see mounted on semis and railroad cars. Eventually, the containers make it back to their port of entry, where they await their return voyage. Since China wishes to reclaim the containers so that it can load them up again, the cost of shipping a container full of stuff from Seattle to China is about \$300, whereas sending it from Seattle to, e.g., Chicago, would cost four times that amount. China has cornered the market.

There’s a dark side to recycling in China. Reading Minter’s recently-released “Junkyard Planet” will make you foreswear the fast food in its inviting containers, the cheap clothing that’s cast off a year later, the electronic toys that, while they may keep you amused or diverted, add nothing to the quality of your life. Like Dennis Pino, you will be motivated not only to recycle but also reuse—and, most importantly, reduce what on second thought amounts to no more than casual purchases to be discarded.