

Town of Bedford
Energy Commission Site Tour
Minutes
May 24, 2019

A site visit of the Waste Management (WM) Materials Recovery Facility (MRF) at 72 Salem Road, Billerica, MA was conducted on May 24, 2019 to observe what happens to single stream recyclables after they are dropped off at the Transfer Station. Present were: Jeff Kerr, John Russell, Andrew Gillis, Bing Lu, Sarah Braese, Bill Foote, John Schneller, Chris Bandazian, and Jerome Spooner (Department of Public Works).

The tour of the MRF began at 9:00 AM. The MRF is located in an old Boston Globe printing building. The building does not have the optimal layout for a MRF, but by using an existing building, WM was able to keep costs down. The MRF serves about 30 communities in Southern NH and Northern MA. They operate three shifts: two process material and the third performs maintenance. There is a surprising amount of maintenance required in this highly automated facility. Even though hand sorting of some of the incoming recyclables is required, there is quite a bit of automation in the sorting of metals, hard plastics, and paper. The thing that gums up the works the most is soft plastic. So workers at the start of the process pull out as much soft plastic and other non-recyclable items as possible before the automated process starts. Soft plastics get caught on the shafts of the sorting machines that sort and items of various sizes and materials. The plastic gets caught around the shafts and prevents items falling through the gaps to the proper sorted bins. Worse for the automated machinery than plastic are things like garden hoses, Christmas lights, and chains that people put in the recycling. The Plant Manager had stories of things they regularly find. Evidently a lot of people think bowling balls and recyclable. While walking through the facility scrap wood was being removed from the flow. Additional common problem items identified by the Plant Manager are half filled beverage containers that cannot be sorted properly due to their weight, bagged recyclables, and liners from pizza boxes (boxes with liners removed are recyclable). Overall, the amount of trash included in the stream going into this MRF is 15% to 20% with some communities curbside collections as high as 35%.

The key to improving the recycling business is to improve the quality of what goes into the flow. Aspirational recycling is the term for when people put something they hope can be recycled into a recycling bin. If there is a doubt about whether something can be recycled, take the time to find out, or if you don't have time, put the item in the trash. It's better to trash a few things than contaminate good material or jam up the MRF.

When China introduced their National Sword policy to limit importation of all but the cleanest recyclables, it effectively shut off US and European exports of recyclables to China. There are stories that recyclable material is stacking up at MRFs and winds up going to a landfill because there is more supply than demand of recycled material. Fortunately, that is not the case in Billerica. The plant is able to find a home for all the recyclables that come through its doors. The facility is not as profitable as it once was since the price for recycled material has dropped as the supply has increased. But at least the single stream recycled material from Bedford is not going to a landfill.

The site visit concluded at 10:25 AM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Jeff Kerr