



LATEST NEWS

Here's why most Whatcom recycling isn't ending up in landfills, despite China's ban

BY KIE RELYEA
krelyea@bhamherald.com

July 01, 2018 05:00 AM
Updated July 01, 2018 05:00 AM

BELLINGHAM — Marty Kuljis has heard the questions before.

Why can't Whatcom County residents and businesses be allowed to dump all of their recycling into one bin, like they do in other places? Why do we have to separate the paper from the glass, cans and plastic?

"A lot of people say it's an archaic system, but it works. Our county hasn't ever gone down that road of mixing them together. Whenever everything is mixed together, it's very difficult to get it separated," said Kuljis, the operations manager for Northwest Recycling Inc., where all of Whatcom County's curbside recycling goes to be further sorted before being sent to a number of locations in the U.S. and overseas for processing and to be turned into other products.

ADVERTISING

Bellingham-based Northwest Recycling is in the commodity recyclables business — meaning the company sells the items it collects at the going rate, which fluctuates.

Be the first to know.

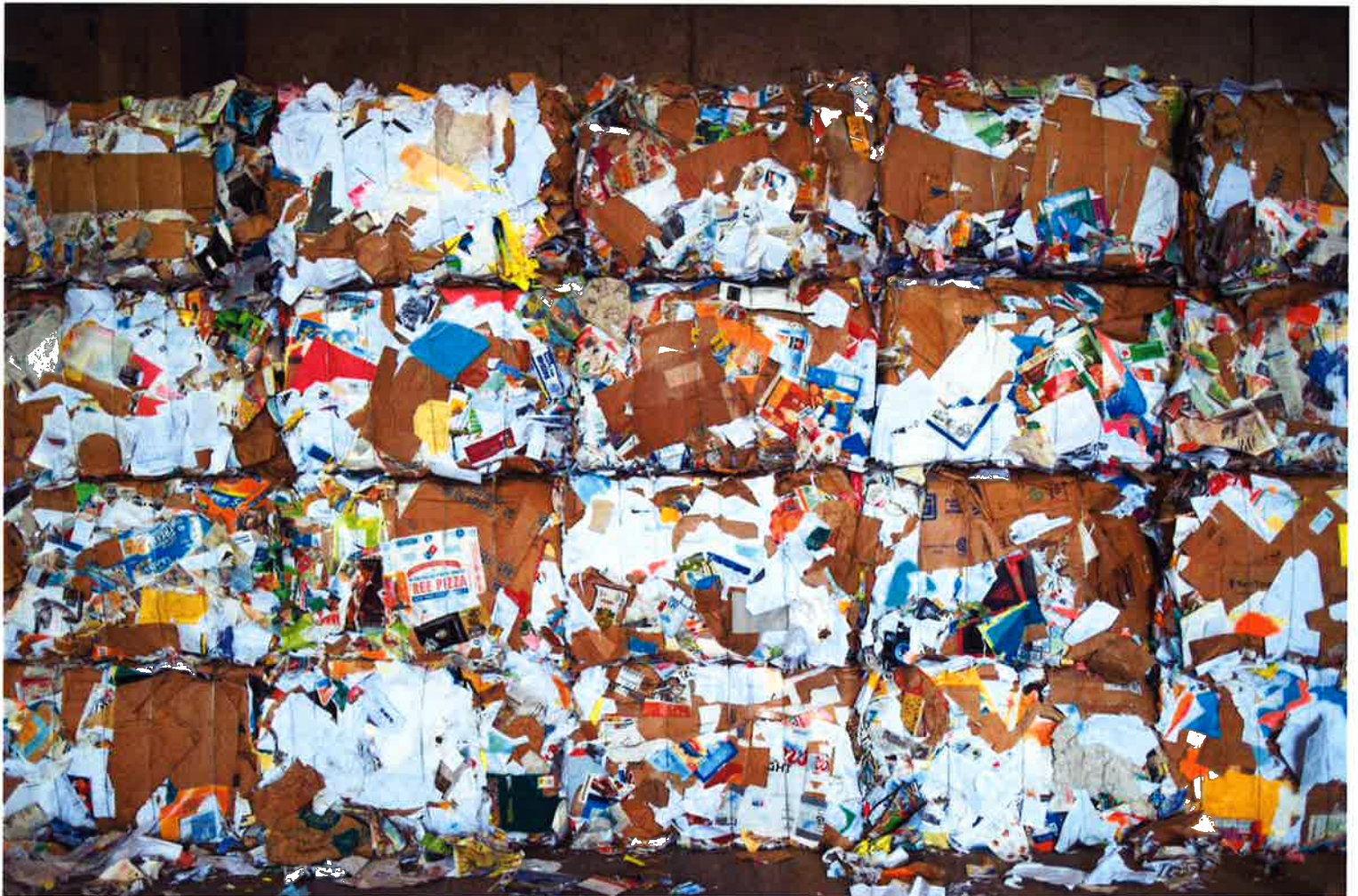
No one covers what is happening in our community better than we do. And with a digital subscription, you'll never miss a local story.

SIGN ME UP!

Asking people to separate their recycling before putting it out on the curb seems to be a good thing now that the worldwide recycling market has become volatile because China, a major market, has stopped accepting certain recyclable waste or tightened its requirements for acceptance.

The issue, for China, has been items that can't be recycled — dirty diapers, greasy pizza boxes and broken glass combined with paper, for example — ended up in the recycling stream. That's called contamination, and it's why 5 percent to 30 percent of recycling from other places actually may end up in landfills.

The contamination rate of Whatcom County's recycling is about 1 percent and that's because the waste system here has stuck to what is called dual-stream recycling, according to Kuljis.



Stacks of paper bales sit along a wall at Northwest Recycling, Inc. in Bellingham. Each bale weighs about 1,300 pounds.

Evan Abell - evan.abell@bellinghamherald.com

Single stream is when all curbside recycling goes into one bin instead of being separated out.

Whatcom's dual-stream recycling is "really going to keep us in a better position than the folks that have gone to single stream," said Calvin Den Hartog, general manager for Nooksack Valley Disposal & Recycling Inc., which picks up trash and recycling for Lynden, Everson, Nooksack, Sumas and parts of unincorporated Whatcom County.

The other large hauler serving Bellingham and Whatcom County is Sanitary Service Co.

"If we weren't, we'd have a lot more problems right now in trying to market these materials," Kuljis said. "I can't say it's been easy, but it's a lot easier than other companies and municipalities across the United States, which is fortunate for us."

RELATED STORIES FROM BELLINGHAM HERALD



Cities scramble to rewrite rules on recycling after China stops taking 'foreign garbage'



Here's what can go into your curbside recycling bins in Whatcom County



From tin cans to rebar, here's what Whatcom County's recycling is made into



Paper is piled in the staging area for the paper baler at Northwest Recycling, Inc. in Bellingham.

Evan Abell - evan.abell@bellinghamherald.com

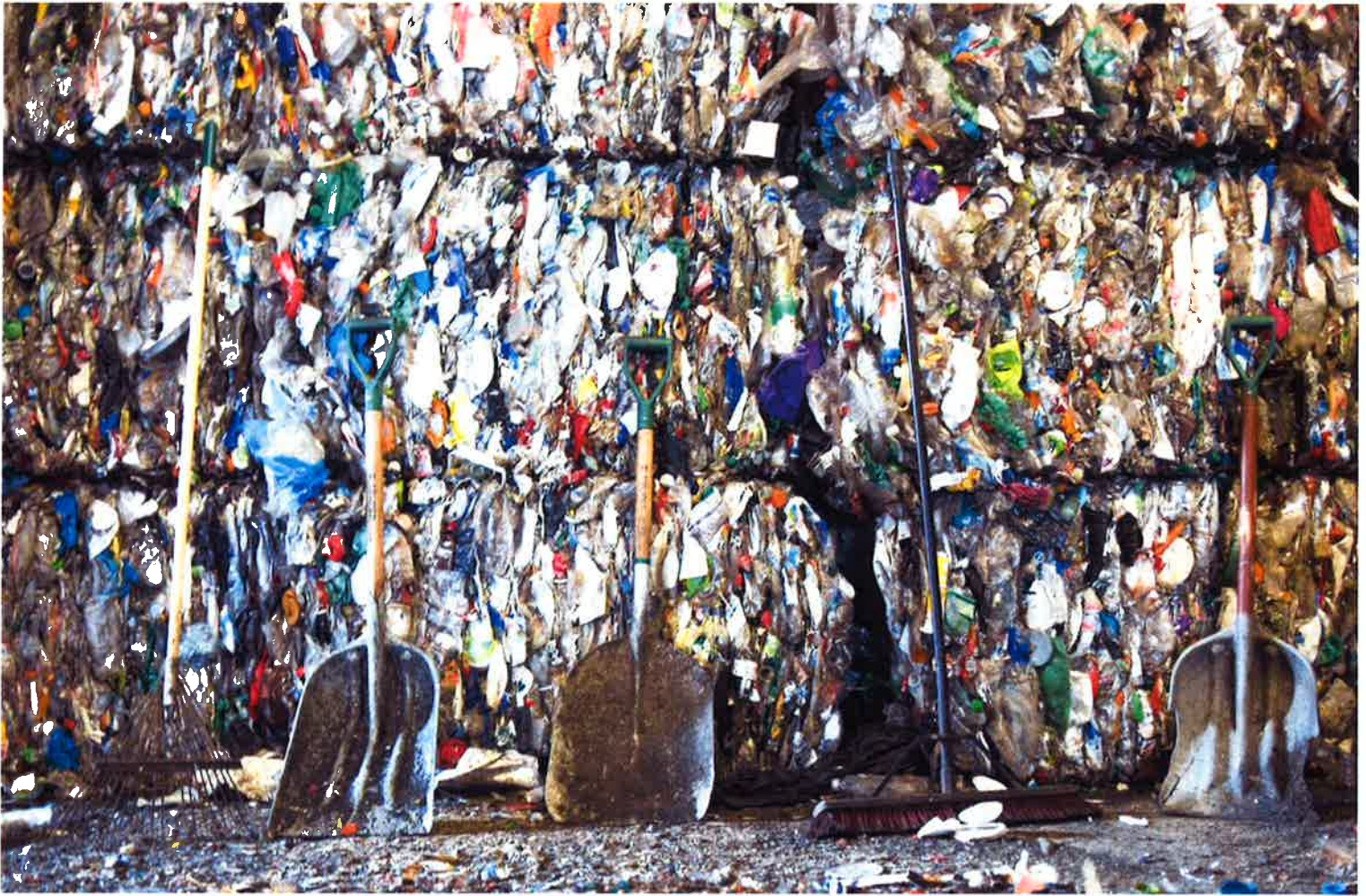
Another factor in favor of the county's recycling occurred when Northwest Recycling began looking for other markets, taking it as a warning to do so after China implemented Operation Green Fence in 2013. Those new markets, for plastic containers and mixed paper, include Malaysia and Vietnam.

"New markets are being developed. People's warehouses are bursting at the seams. Fortunately, ours isn't," Kuljis said.

Still, plastic has been the hardest to move since China stopped accepting it, according to Kuljis.

"We've been able to move stuff, but it's been slow," he said of plastic recyclables.

Nevertheless, the commodities prices have taken a hit and shipping prices have increased. What that means is that consumers will see an increase in what they pay to have their recycling handled, but likely just pennies more a month.



Shovels, a rake and a broom used for cleanup lean against stacked bales of plastic at Northwest Recycling, Inc. in Bellingham.

Evan Abell - evan.abell@bellinghamherald.com

Kuljis talked about recycling on a local and global scale while standing in one of the Northwest Recycling warehouses on C Street in Bellingham. Near him, worker Flavio Pena used a machine to compress paper into bales that weigh 1,300 pounds each. The bales were then stacked against a wall, waiting to be shipped out.

In another warehouse, bales of compressed cans, each weighing 1,000 pounds, are stacked into tall columns. Bales of plastic sit a few feet away.

"It keeps coming in and we have to find a way to do the right thing with it," Kuljis said.

And that means making sure what consumers put into their bins — provided it's clean, separately correctly and actually can be recycled — will be recycled instead of going into the landfill.

"It's being handled properly," Kuljis assured. "Continue to do what they're doing. It's working."

Kie Relyea: 360-715-2234, [@kierelyea](https://twitter.com/kierelyea)

