

Tough times for recycling

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Powell Valley Recycling employees Jeff Schulz (left) and Al Renaud (center), work to load newspaper into a baler, as manager Mary Jo Decker (in the Bobcat) holds the dumpster steady. Decker said the center receives between 9,000 and 12,000 pounds of newspaper each week. The baled papers — which can include the one you're reading right now — will eventually end up in Spokane, Wash., where they are turned into insulation. Tribune photo by CJ Baker

Powell Valley Recycling pressing on

Rumors of Powell Valley Recycling's death have been greatly exaggerated.

"Right now, it's just 'keep it coming,'" says recycling manager Mary Jo Decker.

However, things are tight. The prices paid for recyclables have plummeted dramatically.

"What I have heard is that no one in the business has seen (prices) do this before," said Decker.

Cardboard, which was worth \$90 per ton in July, is now worth \$10.

Office paper went for \$110 a ton this summer, but now fetches only \$20.

Five months ago, Powell Valley Recycling sold its No. 2 colored plastic at \$150 a ton. Today, they have to give it away.

Those are just a few of the dramatic dips.

The across-the-board price collapse has forced Decker to cut employee hours, which, with operating hours remaining constant, "makes it hard on everybody," she said.

However, she added that the Powell Valley Recycling center is ready to weather the storm.

"We have heard rumors that we were going to close on certain days," she said. "We're not."

Additionally, the six-day-a-week center continues to accept all the recyclables they've accepted in the past.

"We're still going to take it. We'll just stockpile it," Decker said.

Powell Valley Recycling is in a crunch for space, but "we can make do for a while," she said.

However, if payments stay down for a long period of time, say, much more than six months, "I don't see how we could keep our doors open," Decker said.

The recycling organization is aided by a \$1.50 surcharge on City of Powell garbage bills, but commodity sales represent more than two-thirds of their annual income.

In the last fiscal year (July '07 to June '08), the center brought in more than \$170,000. Of that, \$50,000 came from the city fees.

"It doesn't pay to recycle. Everybody knows that," Decker said.

Powell Valley Recycling is currently seeking status as a nonprofit organization, but lately, things have been approaching unprofitable.

Decker said the pricing slump is believed to be caused by the sagging U.S. and global economies. In the manufacturing sector, she said, it became cheaper to use brand new materials than recycled ones.

"The whole world market has just collapsed," Decker said.

Fortunately, prices are expected to pick back up in February or March.

Industry experts predict that "it'll still be slow, but it will start coming back," said Decker.

In less-gloomy news, customers at the recycling center are ever-increasing.

This July, they averaged 84 people a day, versus 64 in July 2007. Things are looking up so far this January, too, Decker said.

The amount of material received by Powell Valley Recycling also has steadily increased over the years.

In the 1997-98 fiscal year, the recycling center took in around 292 tons. Ten years later, in '07-'08, it handled nearly 809 tons — a new record.

The center now receives materials from Greybull, Lovell, Byron, and even folks in Meeteetse, who bring their recyclables through Cody (which also has a recycling operation) to get here.

In 2008, Decker's numbers say those within Powell's city limits recycled almost 15 percent of their municipal solid waste — about 2 percent more than last year.

That figure represents stronger numbers than the state of Wyoming as a whole, which is believed to average a mid-single digit recycling rate. However, Powell and the state lag well behind the national rate, which stood at more than 33 percent as of 2007.

Decker predicts that Powell's recycling will continue to increase — especially since the Powell landfill is scheduled to partially close in 2010. That will force the city to find a new location for its garbage, likely Cody, or perhaps Worland. As a result, disposal costs are expected to significantly increase.

With the coming changes, Decker said the city might want to consider charging residents based on how much waste they

generate.

But for her part, Decker needs no financial incentive to recycle.

“My perspective, frankly, is why should we throw away anything that can be used again?” she said.

Regional recycling in Powell?

State-mandated landfill consolidation may force Powell to truck your garbage to Cody. Your recyclables could be staying put.

Starting in late 2010, Cody is expected to be the destination for all of Park County's municipal waste. That's a result of landfill regionalization efforts by the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Now, a look at a county-wide recycling operation is in its preliminary stages.

The Park County Commission has designated \$100,000 of State Loan and Investment Board money to study locations and logistics for a regional recycling center.

At a Powell City Council work session earlier this month, there appeared to be a clear, early favorite to host a consolidated center.

“I think it's a slam dunk that Powell would be a regional recycling center, if we're going to have one,” said city Mayor Scott Mangold.

For one thing, the Powell center is already regional, said Powell Valley Recycling Board Member Ann Hinckley. She said Powell receives materials from Lovell, Greybull, Byron, and Meeteetse.

“The only thing we're really missing is Cody,” said Mangold.

“And we get some of theirs,” Hinckley added.

Furthermore, there's been thought that if Powell trucks its garbage to Cody, the vehicles could bring back recyclables on the return trip.

“It'd be a shame to have empty trucks coming back,” Mangold said.

County Commissioner Dave Burke told Mangold and the council that the county currently has no set plans for recycling.

Burke added that the commission is unexcited about owning and operating a county recycling center.

“The commissioners right now are of the mindset that their plates are full,” he said.

It would be no small task to set up a regional operation from scratch, said acting Park County Solid Waste Superintendent Tim Waddell, in a separate conversation.

Since recycling costs money, a new fee system would need to be developed.

“We can't afford to do it at the landfill with our current structure,” Waddell said.

In Powell, recycling is funded by a \$1.50 surcharge on city garbage bills and through the sale of recyclables. However, the

price of recycling materials has bottomed out, creating difficult times for the industry.

At the worksession, Mangold asked Powell Valley Recycling Manager Mary Jo Decker if Powell was ready to host a regional center today.

“From the looks of commodity prices right now, financially, no,” Decker said.

Mangold asked Decker to put together a “wish list” of items the recycling operation would need to be regional.

Park County, the cities of Powell and Cody, and perhaps Meeteetse, are planning to hold an initial organizational meeting later this month. The purpose, said Cody City Administrator Andy Whiteman, is to determine exactly how regional recycling planning should move forward.

Whiteman said as the process gets moving, he expects there will be many opportunities for public input — from participation on a steering committee to meetings.