

Where Do My Recyclables Go?

MARIANNE PETERS

The town I live in recently started single-stream recycling. Instead of sorting our recyclables into separate piles, we toss them all in one big bin for collection. I have to admit that it felt strange at first to throw everything in together (though I love my big bin). And I heard people in town voicing their concerns: “How can all this get recycled if we throw it in together?” “Isn’t this getting dumped in the landfill?”

I decided that I would follow the path my recycling takes once it leaves my curb. I contacted my local solid waste district, and the director there told me that most of the recycling in my county ends up at a MRF (rhymes with “smurf”) for sorting and shipping.

“A what?” I said.

Turns out, MRF stands for “materials recycling facility.” Visiting the MRF gave me more insight into the ways we use and discard our stuff.

The MRF I visited was housed in an old railroad depot in Elkhart, Indiana, just about thirty miles from where I live. Not just one building, the whole place functioned like a large organism, with loads of waste coming in one end, and bales of waste coming out the other, ready for transport to the companies who would recycle them. The facility collected “pre-consumer waste” from industries—cardboard, shipping materials, plastics—and “post-consumer waste,” the stuff we throw into our recycle bin

every week. My tour guide was Bruce, whose job it was to find markets for all the recyclables this MRF collected. We slipped on safety glasses and reflective vests before walking into the plant. Along the way, bales of materials towered over my head: a ton of pop cans, a ton of cardboard, a ton of milk jugs. Though it wasn’t a windy day, the plant floor was covered with recyclables that were blown off piles or that wiggled loose of their bales.

A newer building housed the machine that sorted post-consumer waste. At one end of the building, sanitation trucks brought in their loads. This was Monday, so among the soda cans, detergent bottles, cereal boxes, and cat food tins I saw lots of copies of the Sunday paper, with its colorful advertising pages. A bulldozer dumped loads of this waste onto a big conveyer belt, which whisked it into the maw of the big machine for sorting. Standing above the conveyer on a catwalk, I watched an issue of AARP magazine slide under my feet with Harrison Ford smiling on the cover.

The machine, as big as a house, was really a series of conveyer belts. As the waste traveled along, it was mechanically sorted with magnets, scanners, and screens. Metal flew up, glass dropped down, paper was diverted at a brisk pace. On the top of the machine, “pickers” stood along the belt, gloved and masked, earplugs in place, pulling out materials to be placed in bunkers for baling. They worked

fast and steadily while the machine clattered around them. Though we no longer sort at curbside, the materials eventually still need sorting by human hands.

From my vantage point on the catwalk, I could see that one bunker—about the size of my daughter’s bedroom—was filling with detergent bottles and other hard, colored plastics. Bruce told me that about 94 percent of the waste coming into this MRF is recycled. The conveyer with stuff to be landfilled seemed sparse indeed, scattered with drinking straws and other odd, crumpled plastics.

Walking out the other end, past the newly baled materials, I reflected on what I had seen. What surprised me the most—and shouldn’t have surprised me, I suppose—was the number of items that represented individual-sized, single-use containers. Soda cans, water and pop bottles, TV dinners, and other food storage containers made up a big part of the waste. True, it was all being recycled, but what if those consumers had just quenched their thirst from a drinking fountain, or made sandwiches instead of processed pot pies? Cardboard was plentiful, too—it made me think of all the packaging my mail-ordered books and clothes arrive in.

Seeing the time and effort it takes to recycle my stuff, I’m more committed to using less of it than ever. ■

Marianne Peters is a freelance writer living in Plymouth, Indiana.