

Ramping Up Recycling

County employee John Longfellow promotes Earth-friendly practices

By Jeanie Senior



John Longfellow, Klickitat County recycling coordinator, shows a handful of garden-ready compost.

There is more to John Longfellow than recycling. But his job as Klickitat County recycling coordinator keeps him focused on the subject.

John travels around the county promoting recycling at community events. He writes about recycling, records radio ads, posts information on the county's website and finds ways to make the subject interesting.

John also set up a volunteer litter-gathering program. The county lends safety vests and other gear and can waive landfill costs for volunteer groups that clean up roadside litter.

Before he got the recycling job in 2003, John spent 15 years working at the Goldendale aluminum smelter. After the smelter closed, he started a computer-based business doing critical documentation. When he was hired by the county, he didn't have a background in composting, recycling or hazardous waste.

"But I like to learn new stuff as long as I have good resources I can fall back on," John says. "I can call the Department of Ecology and talk to people who really know what they're doing in the technical stuff."

Klickitat County's goal is to increase recycling. Last year, tonnage for curbside/drop-off recycling was the second-highest ever recorded in the county. The amount ranges between 10 and 30 percent of the waste stream, which John says is good for a rural county. But Washington's recycling rate was estimated at 50 percent in 2012, and the county would like to equal that.

John hopes markets for recycled items continue to increase.

"A lot of plastics have become valuable because they are a petroleum-based product," John says.

Two items still not accepted for recycling are clear plastic "clamshell" containers used for fruit, vegetables and bakery goods, and Styrofoam.

"We will get there," John says.

One Portland firm accepts Styrofoam. The company provided collection bags for the last Bingen-White Salmon community pride cleanup. The bags were 10 feet in diameter and 15 to 20 feet long, and the community filled six of them. In Portland, the Styrofoam was compacted and sent to California, where it was recycled into more Styrofoam.

As for the clamshells, "it seems like everybody's pushing on that one," John says.

One city in Washington already is collecting the containers with an eye to accumulating a volume sufficient to prompt development of a recycling facility. That is the same approach

that led to recycling cottage cheese and yogurt containers.

In partnership with Roosevelt Landfill operator Republic Services, the county accepts drop-off recycling as well as household hazardous waste, scrap metal, metal appliances and sharps containers—used for needles and lancets—at Republic Services transfer stations in BZ Corners, Dallesport and Goldendale and at the landfill.

Republic Services takes electronic waste, including televisions, laptop computers, e-readers and monitors at the Goldendale transfer station only.

“One of the big things for me is household hazardous waste,” John says. “A lot of chemicals are getting poured on the ground, and a lot of batteries are thrown into the landfill. It’s so easy, and you may think it’s not that much. But if you multiply by the number of people doing it, it runs into big numbers really fast.”

John also writes and administers grants, and maintains the Klickitat County website. His section—www.klickitatcounty.org/SolidWaste—contains a vast amount of information.

He is proud of the compost mix calculator posted there, an application he wrote that reduces sophisticated mathematical calculations “to a simple answer for folks wanting to compost,” he says.

The tool essentially is a recipe for a compost pile.

“You can combine up to four materials and find a combination that approximates something close to the balanced diet the microbes need to thrive in your compost pile,” John says.

“If you do a search on Google for ‘compost mix calculator’ you will see that it is a very popular link on the Internet,” he says. “It is one of the top three pages on the county website.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture has a sustainability web page that links to numerous resources.

“Most of them are universities like Cornell, but one of them is the Klickitat County compost mix calculator,” John says. “It has been referenced in studies for the United Nations as a resource for developing nations. I have been contacted by people from all over the world seeking information on composting.”



Composting creates a valuable soil supplement and keeps items out of the landfill. Part of John’s job is to encourage composting. He takes this display to community gatherings to acquaint people with composting principles and practices.

Before he became recycling coordinator, John had done only minimal composting.

“This was an opportunity to do it really seriously,” he says.

John tried what he calls competitive composting—trying to get the highest temperature in the compost pile for the quickest composting rate.

“I’m not an advocate of that type of composting for most people,” he says. “It’s a lot more work than having goldfish.”

What he calls passive composting may be slower, but it works. It still produces good compost.

“What I think is really important is that compost is not a fertilizer—it’s a soil amendment,” John says. “It has a very high percentage of humus, and humus is the thing that provides the ability for nutrients to get to the plant.”

Since 2005, John has done radio ads on the Goldendale station—half-minute public service spots in which John offers bits of information about recycling.

He has been surprised that people really seem to like the ads. One surprised him more than others.

“I was trying to be funny, and I said if your dog is interested in your recycle bag, there’s something in there that doesn’t belong.”

He advised dog owners to let the dog sniff out the bag before closing it. Dog owners have told him it is a suggestion that really works.

“I was just joking,” he says. ■