

Linda Intro: Sustainable Idaho is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Madison Long Intro: Welcome to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host, Madison Long, and this week I had the opportunity to interview Tom Kirkman, the Director of Public Services for the City of Pocatello. Welcome to the show. Today we're going to talk about Pocatello's recycling and their proposal to start a new commercial cardboard program. Currently the city already offers residential curbside recycling, e-waste recycling, and glass recycling. And according to the City of Pocatello, 2010 tons of recyclable material were collected in 2024. But where exactly does all this material come from?

Tom Kirkman: So the 2,010 tons is from what we call our single stream, which is our curbside recycling bins, the blue bins out in front of the houses. So that material is what comes from residential homes. We're able to accept ones, twos, fives, tin cans, aluminum cans, cardboard, and paper in those. For the commercial cardboard, what we're proposing and what we want to start is these will be containers behind businesses that collect cardboard only. And because it doesn't have to be sorted, we actually can have a return on that investment.

ML: Right now when residents and businesses recycle their cardboard, it gets mixed in with all the other recycled materials in a single stream to be sent off to a material recovery factory, or MRF, for sorting. Afterwards, Pocatello will receive a rebate from their sold materials. Unfortunately, single stream recycling is expensive, ranging from about \$60 to \$80 per ton in order to process, sort, and sell. Through Pocatello's proposed commercial cardboard program, businesses will be able to separate their cardboard from other recycled materials right off the bat, which can then be sent directly to a paper mill.

TK: We're not looking at residential right now. Residential has the opportunity to put the cardboard in their container. Down the road, we don't know. Maybe down the road it looks like we get a residential cardboard program.

ML: How did the idea for commercial cardboard get started?

TK: What started this is we assumed the recycling facility here in town, which is what we call a bailing facility. This is where we compress the material to make it easy to haul. We were getting, you know, some small amounts of cardboard, and it became really apparent to us quickly that if we could get more clean cardboard, we could actually make money that would offset the single stream cost. It was kind of an economic decision that we came up with that we hope can help keep the cost of recycling as a whole as minimal as possible.

ML: The new commercial cardboard recycling program has been introduced as a way to support environmental sustainability in Pocatello. How does this program help achieve that goal?

TK: Well, the first thing is cardboard's almost infinitely recyclable, right? It can go back to a paper mill. It can be used again. So as far as sustainability goes, it's kind of a no-brainer. How it helps our community is anything that we don't put in our landfill helps keep our costs down. So

we look at what's called diversion rates, and we try and divert as much material as we can out of the garbage into recycle. And so right now, our diversion rate's right around between 9% and 10%. So two reasons for that. We want to recycle the material because that's something that has a secondary use. But second of all, landfills are very expensive to build. They require large amounts of money, large amounts of space. And so any time that we can divert any of the waste stream to an alternative use, it helps us lower our costs to the citizens so that we don't have to invest as much money in expanding the landfill.

ML: Although the commercial cardboard program hasn't been approved yet, the city is moving towards implementing the program tentatively around June 1st. Originally, Western Recycling did the residential and commercial recycling pickups, although now that responsibility will shift to the city, with the first step of business being procuring containers for commercial businesses. So what sets this program apart from the recycling efforts that are already in place in Pocatello?

TK: Yeah, so it just adds one more aspect to our recycling program citywide. Pocatello is passionate about recycling. It's pretty awesome to experience it. And so we have our curbside single stream, we have yard waste, we have glass recycling, we have e-waste. This just adds another opportunity for our commercial accounts now that have large amounts of cardboard to help with that. It just kind of expands what's already a really good program in the community, and it gives some of the commercial accounts a way to do recycling as well.

ML: Pocatello's curbside recycling program already sees a strong participant rate of 77%. How is this new program expected to increase participation?

TK: We're very proud of that number, that 77%. That's a huge attaboy to the citizens of Pocatello that shows that they're very passionate about it. We have about 20,000 to 25,000 accounts, both residential and commercial. And so when you're at 77%, that means about 5,000 or 6,000 accounts that aren't doing any recycling. And majority of those are commercial accounts because we just haven't had this program available. As we start adding more folks and more businesses and more accounts to this, our participation rate is just going to keep climbing. We'd love to have every waste generator in Pocatello be involved in recycling. We'd like to get that to 100% and say that every single citizen, every account in the city of Pocatello has an opportunity to recycle. That's a goal we shoot for.

ML: In what ways will the entire Pocatello community benefit from the commercial cardboard recycling program?

TK: Yeah, one of the big benefits is, of course, sustainability, right? We want to do what's right for the environment. But earlier this year, we had a little bit of a scare because the private corporation that was running our recycling facility decided they wanted to shut their doors. We were afraid that we were going to lose our program because we didn't have anywhere to take that. And so our mayor and our city council made the decision that we're going to move forward and keep this program alive because it is so beneficial to the community. But like we talked about before, our single stream is very, very expensive. And what this commercial cardboard is

going to do is enable us to lower that cost through supplementing the curbside with cardboard so that for the future, we don't ever have to make those tough decisions about, well, it's getting so expensive to recycle, we're going to have to cancel. That's what we don't want to do is we don't want to eliminate recycling in the city of Pocatello. And so what this cardboard program is going to do is help us make it a little bit more affordable so that in the future, we have this program, both our single stream and our commercial.

ML: Do you have anything you'd like to add for our listeners to know about the commercial cardboard program or just why they should recycle in general?

TK: The big thing I guess we could get across is that our facility over on 30-34 Garrett Way down off of Alameda Road, there's customer drop-offs there. We live in an Amazon world, right? We live in a world where we get a lot of cardboard and we have a location now where we can take that stuff instead of just throwing it in the garbage and it ends up in the landfill.

ML Outro: Thank you to Tom Kirkman for telling us a little more about the upcoming commercial cardboard program. For more information, visit the City of Pocatello's recycling website at [Pocatello Recycling Services | City of Pocatello](#)

We also have a community announcement. Idaho Fish and Game needs your help with monarch butterflies. Volunteers adopt a milkweed patch and visit three times throughout the summer. Fish and Game will be hosting a virtual training webinar on May 28th from 7 to 9. For more information, contact Joel Sautter at MilkweedCommunityScience at idfg.idaho.gov.

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