

Pete Pearson: Waste can produce energy — or take up space in landfills

READER'S VIEW: RECYCLING

BY PETE PEARSON - Idaho Statesman

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I was excited to see the Idaho Statesman article on Nov. 2 that outlined a potential deal between Dynamis and Ada County to build a waste-to-energy plant in Idaho. The article shows us there is money and jobs hidden in what we throw away.

What we waste defines what we value. By that measure, current recycling estimates in the U.S. show that we value very little. Sixty to 80 percent of all consumer products end up in a landfill within six months of purchase.

According to WorldWatch.org, we generate an extra 5 million tons of household waste and three times as much food waste between Thanksgiving and New Year's.

Thankfully, our collective consciousness is changing. We are realizing the limits of our small planet and the interconnectedness of all things. We are relearning to live within nature's rules.

The most important rule in nature is that waste does not exist. Nature recycles everything.

At Albertsons and Supervalu, we have set a long-term goal to become a zero-waste enterprise.

The first milestone in becoming a zero-waste enterprise is for stores and offices to consistently divert 90 percent of their waste away from landfills. Associates are focusing on sorting and recycling all material — whether that is cardboard, plastics or mixed paper. These materials generate income for our business and eventually flow back through an industrial cycle to be made into new things.

Food waste and organic material (derived from plants and animals) represent our biggest challenge. Organic waste can represent between 20 and 40 percent of the municipal waste stream, and it's roughly the same percentage of total waste at a grocery store.

It is also the heaviest of all materials, so it's more expensive to truck to a landfill. Once in a landfill, it slowly decomposes and releases methane. Finally, because organic material is buried and highly compacted, it yields no soil benefits.

Businesses are collecting sorted organics at competitive prices and using anaerobic digesters to convert the methane into energy. The digester bi-product is then used to feed composting operations where it's sold as a microbial fertilizer.

Organic waste is a community asset. The irony is we're paying money to send it to a landfill where it returns no benefit.

Multiple Albertsons stores in Southern California and in the Intermountain West region are already achieving 90 percent landfill diversion rates.

Communities like Bellingham, Wash., have made it a priority to start a zero waste journey, where residents are diverting their organic waste to support for-profit composting facilities like Cedar Grove Composting.

These new businesses are turning waste into energy and then selling compost to feed gardens, golf courses, brownfield remediation and local farms. In addition, these communities are creating new jobs and spending less money on petroleum-based fertilizers.

As I travel the country to work on sustainability efforts, I can say without hesitation that moving to zero waste is only possible after a community makes it a priority. As an Idaho native and resident of Boise, I believe our community has a great opportunity to lead, rather than follow, when it comes to moving toward zero waste.

I believe that when we throw things "away," we're literally throwing away money, jobs and fertilizer for our soils. Our waste is ripe for economic opportunity. Boise should consider formulating and executing a zero-waste strategy; whether achieved through private or public ventures. After all, what we waste defines what we value.

Pete Pearson is the director of sustainability and national accounts for Supervalu and its affiliated banners.