
MEMORANDUM

To: Dr. Josephine Archibald
From: Justin Hawkins
Subject: Field trip for Recology
Date: October 22th, 2019

Purpose:

To collect and share my thoughts inspired by our visit to the Humboldt County Recology Facility.

Discussion:

Our class arrived at the Recology Humboldt County Facility, where we were met by Chuck, the general manager. He had us all sit down in their presentation room so we could go over the general overview of the facility without all the noise coming from the processing line.

When the last manager of the plant went under, Recology purchased the facility and updated the multi-stream systems to a single stream. This has allowed Chuck to meet some of the more strict requirements set out by China, who used to receive most of our recycling before their enactment of the National Sword policy. The recycling they were receiving was contaminated at a percentage far exceeding their new requirements of roughly 5%.

We also spent some time talking about common misconceptions regarding recycling. There is a lot of mislabeling out there. Often plastics containing some percentage of recyclable components will label their entire product as recyclable. These pseudo recyclables count towards that contamination percentage and have to be removed by hand by the workers on Chuck's line. This discussion developed into the nuances of enforcing recycling. Eureka will soon be trying out "whoopsie tags". If a collection agent notices something not recyclable in a bin it will be tagged and left behind for the customer to sort through themselves. Once sorted recycling will come empty the bin. Three consecutive tags will result in a fine. Chuck made it seem like a difficult balance between landfill diversion and contamination rates. If they are too lenient, letting people contaminate their recycling, they don't get as much money for their bills. Certain kinds of contaminations can even lead to a whole truckload being refused.

Conclusion:

This field trip along with our trip to the Arcata Marsh have really forced to reevaluate my personal relationship with this sort of infrastructure. Something that is easy to take for granted. Even such a seemingly simple thing as recycling is rich with nuances. I had been making so many assumptions about what was recyclable without . It can certainly be overwhelming at first and having that experience I think helps me sympathize with the general public. It doesn't seem effective to outsource responsibility on us as individuals. This whoopsie tag for instance. No matter how good we get at recycling as a community it won't change the fact that most products are distributed in non-recyclable disposable plastic. We need to shift the consequences and responsibilities onto the manufacturer. Control it at that source. But what can Eureka do against these mega-corporations flooding town with trash plastic? Not much, I'm afraid. Those sorts of solutions require organizing at a much higher level.