



Recycling Steering Committee

Modernizing Oregon's recycling system with support from Oregon Consensus

Study of Material Recovery Facility Workers

Introduction

Oregon's Recycling Steering Committee (RSC) is evaluating different recycling system framework options that aim to improve recycling throughout Oregon. The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has identified the need for input from workers at Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) to gain a greater understanding of how the different framework options and subsequent recommendations may affect those workers. The framework options that the RSC has been evaluating are complex. Considerations include increased enforcement and coordinating roles for the State, new responsibilities for manufacturers and brands in paying for or helping manage the recycling system, changes in local government responsibilities, new requirements on MRFs to reduce contamination in materials they sell, and approaches to greater uniformity and transparency in the system.

The purpose of this MRF Workers Study was to hear directly from individuals currently working at MRFs, with an emphasis on the least senior staff working on sorting lines, to inform the RSC's recommendations about where to make financial investments and policy improvements. Impacts of these larger decisions on MRF workers may come directly—such as increased regulation of worker pay and working conditions—or indirectly, through changes such as improved collection and resident education that reduces the amount of contamination MRFs receive.

The study included two components: stakeholder interviews with individual workers and an online survey, both conducted in both Spanish and English. The study was conducted by Barney & Worth, supported by The Formation Lab and BanksCuesta Translations LLC. Participants were compensated with gift cards funded by The Recycling Partnership. Individual interviews were kept confidential and only combined results are presented here.

This memorandum is organized as follows:

- Approach
- Key Themes
- Conclusions
- Attachments

This Draft Memorandum includes results from interviews conducted between July 18 and August 18, 2020 and online surveys completed through August 17, 2020. This memorandum will be updated in September 2020 with any additional collected information. Stakeholder interview and survey questions are included as attachments.

Approach

The approach included two components, stakeholder interviews and an online survey. A description of the two components is as follows.

Stakeholder Interviews. Stakeholder interviews were conducted with a total of 24 individuals from five MRFs in the Pacific Northwest. MRF leaders provided contact information for workers. The study did not require a specific process for selecting workers for interviews. In some cases, contacts were selected by supervisors, in other cases supervisors asked for volunteers using sign-up sheets. Workers were then contacted by the consultant team to schedule the interview. The interviews lasted around 10 to 15 minutes and workers were compensated with a \$30 gift card. Interview questions in Spanish and English and a list of participating facilities are provided in Attachment A.

Characteristics of the interviewed workers were as follows:

- A total of 24 workers were interviewed, selected from contact information provided for 31 workers. Interviewed staff include:
 - Ten line sorters who work directly on the sort line removing contamination or pulling out recyclables.
 - Five line leads who work as direct supervisors on the sort lines.
 - Nine workers serving in other positions including higher level supervisors, equipment operators and metals buyers.
- Ten of the interviews were conducted in Spanish and 14 in English.
- Level of experience ranged from three weeks to 25 years, with a median level of experience of five years. For the line sorters, the average years of experience was 2.5 years and the median was 2.5 years. The level of staff turnover in the industry is generally high, so the level of experience of interviewed workers likely exceeded the industry average.¹
- Workers came from five facilities in the Pacific Northwest, including two non-profit facilities and three conventional, for-profit facilities.

Online Survey. The online survey was available starting July 15, 2020 and will remain open until August 31, 2020. Survey questions were intended to collect similar information, but less detailed, than the interviews with the goal of capturing a wider pool of workers. A list of the survey questions and full results in Spanish and English is provided in Attachment B. MRFs were asked to post a flyer for workers to access the survey in SurveyMonkey via QR code or web address. MRFs included the five facilities participating in the stakeholder interviews, as well as three additional facilities. Two randomly selected respondents will be rewarded with a \$50 gift card.

Unfortunately, participation in the survey was low, with only six responses in English and one in Spanish. Based on zip codes provided by respondents, respondents include staff from three of the five MRFs. Although the level of participation was low, overall, responses were consistent with feedback received in the interviews.

Key Themes

Key themes that emerged from both the stakeholder interviews and online survey results about MRF worker experiences are summarized below with accompanying quotes from the interviews.

Workers find materials sorting an inherently strenuous and potentially hazardous job—in particular at facilities receiving residential materials. Sort line workers are on their feet all day and have to deal

¹ <https://www.wastedive.com/news/recycling-labor-mrf-high-risk-hidden-workforce>

with dirty materials. Workers noted common occurrences of hazards such as syringes, caustic chemicals, diapers, and food waste. Workers who had experience in facilities receiving commercial-only materials versus mixed commercial/residential materials noted the much higher level of contamination in residential waste. Along with dust, contamination of materials was the most commonly cited downside of working at a MRF.

"It's a very dirty job. It's very demanding, the hours can be crazy, especially when you are on the sort line in the summertime it is very hot and who knows what's coming across the line."

"I don't like it when the residential customers throw into the recycle bins; batteries, diapers, and other trash that doesn't belong in the recycling. There needs to be a process to improve separation/sorting habits by the residential customers so that there is a separation between the trash and the recycling."

"The worst part of the job is finding syringes in the garbage. One day we had a bag drop out that was full of syringes filled with blood and it was obvious they had been used for drugs."

Investments in a healthy workplace environment—such as dust and climate controls—are lacking.

Workers' most common concern was dust, noting dust control measures were absent or not operational. Workers also complained of generally dirty conditions, cold/hot temperatures, and needed maintenance. Though unpleasant, workers mostly did not consider dust, dirt and uncomfortable temperatures to be elements of "safety."

"The worst thing about working at a MRF is definitely the dust. There's not really anything done to control the dust. I've worked with some places with exhaust fans and stuff, but they are always not working."

"I dislike the dust and dirt. I would like a cleaner work environment. We need better personal protective equipment."

"The worst part of working at a MRF is the conditions outside when you are standing in the heat or areas get too cold because of wind flow."

"Things are good here but there are things that need to be fixed. For example, the floor where people recycle bottles needs to be fixed and the stairs need to be fixed."

Workers note strong safety cultures with rigorous practices and report work environments that are as safe or safer than others they have worked in.

Workers describe orderly work environments, standardized procedures, and a rigorous adherence to those procedures when something goes wrong (e.g., worker being jabbed by a syringe). Most workers described the work environment as safer or as safe as other places they have worked, though one noted a need for more communications to be available in Spanish. The MRFs may be safe, but lack of dust and climate controls make them uncomfortable environments to work in.

"I feel safe. We have everything we need for an accident or if an incident were to occur. I feel like the place where I am employed is prepared."

"Safety in the workplace is very good here. They give us a lot of safety training on how to do our jobs properly."

"The morning safety meeting is in English but there are workers that need Spanish. Afterwards there is a safety test for 15 to 20 minutes. They should have the information in English and Spanish."

"It is pretty safe here. There are specific sort lines that are more dangerous than others. Baling wire, live firearms, and other items are dangerous materials that you have to guard against. You have to know how to handle the situation to be safe. There could be a little more safety training."

MRF workers are proud of their role in the recycling system and wish their compensation reflected their value to the community. Many are satisfied with benefits, but find the pay insufficient, in particular considering the physical and hazardous nature of the job. Workers also noted appreciating their coworkers, the variety of the work, and the opportunity to advance.

"It's just a good environment. Always stuff to do, keeps me busy, I can advance there, make a career out of this place."

"I like contributing to society and participating in a good hard day of work."

"We receive zero support. The haulers, mills, and others in this field get funded by the State and receive support. However, our organization which is considered a processor doesn't get support or funding. I feel like the lack of support is the reason why things stay the same."

"I would say the pay is lower than other places. The benefits are pretty excellent, but the pay is lower."

"They should pay us more in this field due to the physically demanding work and that it is very dangerous. We are in danger every day due to the kind of materials that come down the sorting line every day which requires us to be careful."

The above themes were consistent between for-profit and non-profit facilities. Issues like low pay and lack of dust and climate controls were noted at all facilities. Similarly, both for-profit and non-profit facilities were noted to have strong safety cultures. The below quotes are paired to represent for-profit and non-profit

Example quotes on dust (one from a worker from a non-profit MRF, the other from a for-profit MRF):

"There is a lot of dust and contaminant particles in the air"

"I don't like that it's really dusty. They need to install something to help eliminate the dust particles in the air."

Example quotes on safety (one from a worker from a non-profit MRF, the other from a for-profit MRF):

"Yes, it is a very safe place and they take the necessary precautions to ensure safety policies are used within the workplace."

"I feel like this is an extremely safe environment. As long as a person pays attention to what they are doing they should be fine."

Conclusions

The goal of this study was to gain a greater understanding of how the RSC frameworks and subsequent decisions may affect MRF workers. Conclusions from this study are as follows:

- **MRF facilities and workers are out of sight, out of mind.** As materials move through the recycling system they become increasingly less visible to consumers, with a corresponding degradation in working conditions and compensation.
- **Improving sorting practices and accountability upstream of MRFs would have a significant positive impact on worker safety and conditions**—in particular at MRFs receiving residential materials.
- **Big improvements in MRF worker compensation and conditions are unlikely without a greater societal investment** in this component of the recycling system. With conditions similar at both non-profit and for-profit facilities, current compensation for this service appears insufficient to fund better pay and improved conditions for workers.
- **Both MRF workers and MRFs can benefit from improved pay and conditions for workers if there is a concurrent increase in compensation for MRF services.** Workers would benefit directly from improved pay and conditions. MRF owners would benefit from greater worker satisfaction and lower turnover.
- **Smaller and non-profit facilities may struggle with initial capital investments to upgrade facilities,** even if long-term compensation for sorting services increases. The RSC may want to consider programs such as low interest loans to support those initial investments.

Attachments

Attachment A. Stakeholder Interviews—Participating Facilities and Stakeholder Questions

Attachment B. Online Survey Questions and Results

Attachment A. Stakeholder Interviews—Participating Facilities and Stakeholder Questions

Participating Facilities

- EFI Recycling, Portland, OR
- Far West Recycling, Portland, OR
- Garten Services, Salem, OR
- Reach Incorporated, Klamath Falls, OR
- Waste Connections of Washington, Inc., Clark County, WA

Stakeholder Interview Questions (English)

Introduction. Oregon is evaluating how to modernize the state’s recycling system, looking at how the system is managed, who pays for it, which items can be recycled, and more. A group called the Recycling Steering Committee—made up of businesses, governments and nonprofits—is leading the process and wants to know more about your experience working in a Materials Recovery Facility (MRF).

Your responses will be combined with responses from all the people we interview, and your name will not be included in the report. The interview should take around 10 to 15 minutes. You will be compensated for your time with a gift card—at the end of the interview we will talk about the gift card options and where you want us to mail the card.

I’ll just be asking you a series of questions and you answer each one the best that you can!

1. How long have you worked at MRFs? What do you do at the MRF?
2. What do you like most about working at a MRF?
3. What do you like least about working at a MRF?
4. Compared to other jobs you’ve had, are the pay and benefits better, worse or about the same as other places you have worked?
5. Compared to other jobs you’ve had, do you feel working in a MRF is more safe, less safe, or about the same as other places you have worked? Why?
6. Why do you continue to work at the MRF?
7. If you could change one thing about working at the MRF, what would it be? Why?
8. Is there anything else you’d like to share with the Recycling Steering Committee about your experience working in a MRF?
9. What zip code do you live in?
10. If you feel comfortable sharing, what is your race or ethnicity?

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today! We are providing \$30 gift cards to compensate you for your time. There are lots of different ones—two popular ones are Fred Meyer and Safeway. What type of gift card would work for you? Where should we mail the gift card to?

Stakeholder Interview Questions (Spanish)

Introducción. Oregón está evaluando como modernizar el sistema de reciclaje del estado, fijándose en como el sistema es manejado, quién paga por él, que artículos pueden ser reciclados, y más. Un grupo llamado el Comité de la Dirección del Reciclaje – conformado por negocios, gobiernos y organizaciones sin fines de lucro – está liderando el proceso y desea saber más acerca de su experiencia trabajando en las Instalaciones de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF por sus siglas en inglés).

Sus respuestas serán combinadas con las respuestas de todas las personas que entrevistemos y su nombre no será incluido en el reporte. La entrevista podrá tomar alrededor de 10 a 15 minutos. Usted será compensado por su tiempo con una tarjeta de regalo – al final de la entrevista nosotros platicaremos acerca de las opciones de tarjetas de regalo y a que dirección desea usted que le enviemos la tarjeta.

¡Le haré una serie de preguntas y usted responderá cada una lo mejor que pueda!

1. ¿Hace cuánto ha trabajado en las Instalaciones de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF)? ¿Tiene un trabajo en una Instalación de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF) en este momento?
2. ¿Qué le gusta más acerca de trabajar en una instalación de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF)?
3. ¿Qué es lo que menos le gusta acerca de trabajar en una instalación de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF)?
4. Comparado con otros trabajos que ha tenido, ¿es el salario y los beneficios mejores, peores o lo mismo que en otros lugares que ha trabajado?
5. Comparado con otros trabajos que ha tenido ¿usted siente que trabajara en una Instalación de Recuperación de Materiales es más seguro, menos seguro, o igual de seguro que en otros lugares donde ha trabajado? ¿Por qué?
6. Si usted todavía trabaja en un MRF ¿Por qué se quedó?
7. Si usted pudiera cambiar una cosa acerca de trabajar en una Instalación de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF), ¿Qué sería y por qué?
8. ¿Hay algo más que le gustaría compartir con el Comité de la Dirección de Reciclaje acerca de su experiencia trabajando con una Instalación de Recuperación de Materiales (MRF)?
9. ¿Cuál es el código postal de su hogar?
10. Si usted se siente cómodo, ¿Cuál es su raza y etnia?

¡Gracias por tomarse el tiempo de hablar conmigo hoy! Nosotros estamos entregando tarjetas de regalo de \$30 para compensarlo por su tiempo. Hay muchas de distinto tipo – las dos más populares son las de Fred Meyer y Safeway. ¿Qué tipo de tarjeta de regalo sería buena para usted? ¿A qué dirección deberíamos enviar esta tarjeta de regalo?

Attachment C – Online Survey Results

The questions and results from the online survey are attached. Names and zip codes have been removed to prevent associating responses with specific individuals and facilities.

Results forthcoming