

# MRF Worker Outreach

Sanne Stienstra, DEQ  
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**Recycling Steering Committee**

*Modernizing Oregon's recycling system with support from Oregon Consensus*

# Follow along with the report:

[www.oregon.gov/deq/recycling/Documents/RSCMRFWWorkerOutreachSummary09112020.pdf](http://www.oregon.gov/deq/recycling/Documents/RSCMRFWWorkerOutreachSummary09112020.pdf)



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# Purpose

- Engage community members with less representation on RSC
- Provide feedback to process
  - Especially opportunities to make financial investments and policy improvements
- Begin building trust and long-term relationships within underrepresented communities



# Stakeholders

- *This report:* MRF workers
- *Previous report:* System users with access barriers

[www.oregon.gov/deq/recycling/Documents/recSCunderrepStake.pdf](http://www.oregon.gov/deq/recycling/Documents/recSCunderrepStake.pdf)



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# Consultant team



**Libby Bakke**  
Barney & Worth



**Nicki Pozos**  
The Formation Lab



**Carlos Banks**  
BanksCuesta Translations

*The combined team brought experience integrating underrepresented voices into public infrastructure decisions, creating equity-focused outreach efforts, and facilitating groups from diverse backgrounds.*



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# Approach

- Stakeholder interviews
  - By phone
  - English and Spanish
  - Five facilities:
    1. EFI Recycling (Portland)
    2. Far West Recycling (Portland)
    3. Garten Services (Salem)
    4. REACH Inc (Klamath Falls)
    5. Waste Connections (Vancouver, WA)
- Online survey
  - English and Spanish
  - Distributed by the five facilities above, and three WM facilities in Washington



**THANK YOU**



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# Interviewee characteristics

24 workers interviewed

- 10 line sorters
- 5 line leads
- 9 other (supervisors, equipment operators, metals buyers)

- Level of experience: Three weeks to 25 years (median = 5 years)
- For line sorters, median = 2.5 years

- 6 Hispanic/Latino/Latinx
- 5 White
- 1 Marshallese
- 12 declined to respond

- 10 Spanish
- 14 English



# Questions

- What do you like most and least about working at a MRF?
- Are pay and benefits better, worse or about the same as other places you've worked?
- Do you feel working in a MRF is more safe, less safe, or about the same as other places you've worked?
- Why do you continue working at the MRF?
- If you could change one things about working there, what would it be?
- Is there anything else you'd like to share with the RSC?





# Key Theme #1

Workers find materials sorting an inherently strenuous and potentially hazardous job.

*“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.”*

*“The worst part of the job is finding syringes in the garbage.”*

*“There needs to be a process to improve separation and sorting habits by the residential customers so that there is a separation between the trash and the recycling.”*



# Key Theme #2

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

*“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.”*

*“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.”*



# Key Theme #3

Workers generally note strong safety cultures with rigorous practices and report work environments that are as safe or safer than others they have worked 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... You have to know how to handle the situation to be safe. There could be a little more safety training.”*



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# Key Theme #4

MRF workers are proud of their role in the recycling system and wish their compensation reflected their value to the community.

*“I like contributing to society and participating in a good hard day of work.”*

*“The haulers, mills, and others in this field get funded by the State and receive support. However, our organization... doesn’t get support or funding. I feel like the lack of support is the reason why things stay the same.”*

*“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.”*

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



# Key Theme #5

The themes were consistent between for-profit and non-profit facilities.

Example quotes, one from a non-profit MRF worker, one from a for-profit MRF worker

## On dust:

*“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.”*

## On safety:

*“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

- MRFs and workers are out of sight, out of mind for consumers
- Improvements are needed before materials reach MRF
- To improve working conditions and pay for MRF workers, greater investment is needed in processing
- Some facilities may struggle with necessary capital investments
- Improved working conditions and pay would benefit entire system





# Thank you!

Contact:

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