

Energy and Recycling Committee (ERC) News

Our goal is to increase municipal recycling from our current rate of 29% to 35% by 2017 and 40% by 2019

After ecomaine, Where Do Our Recyclables Go – Recyclable Material Commodities Markets

Every week, tons of recyclable materials are collected and transported to ecomaine where they are sorted and baled by material type. But then what happens to them? These bales of cardboard, paper, aluminum, and different types of plastics become recycled raw material commodities are sold as recycled raw material commodities for the manufacture of new products (price per ton is determined by the global commodities market). Revenue from these commodities provided some of the initial funding for construction of ecomaine's single sort recycling facility back in 2007 and ongoing sale of these commodities continues to be a source of revenue for ecomaine. So, your recyclables not only generate revenue, but every ton of recyclable material that is diverted from the trash saves the City of South Portland \$70.50.

When a manufacturer makes a product and needs raw material, they may have a choice between recycled raw material and virgin raw material. Virgin raw materials, such as trees for paper or ore for metal, need to be extracted or harvested, transported and processed. This is often an energy intensive process. The use of recycled raw materials reduces the amount of overall energy used and greenhouse gases emitted during the entire production process. Manufacturers who use recycled raw materials use less energy. Recycled raw materials are remanufactured into new products. For example, "paper is often recycled into more newsprint, cardboard into more cardboard, cans into new steel, and plastic into more plastic. However, PET (plastic) soda bottles are also used to make fleece clothing or synthetic "wool." (<http://www.ecomaine.org/recycling-and-waste-disposal/>)

As with any market, prices for recycled material commodities fluctuate as a result of supply and demand. If it is more cost effective for a company to use recycled raw material rather than virgin raw material, demand for recycled material will increase and prices paid to recycling facilities for those materials will also increase. Unfortunately there has been a decline in recycled commodity prices over the past few years. Low oil prices make it cheaper for some manufacturers to make plastic containers from virgin raw materials than from recycled plastic. Strength of the US dollar relative to other currencies around the world makes our materials more expensive compared to local virgin or recycled raw materials. Decreased demand from China due to a slowing economy and an increase in internal recyclable material collection and generation has also had a significant negative impact on US commodities markets.

As markets for commodities fluctuate, we as recyclers and consumers have more than one role to play in making the system successful. We need to think about recycling as much as possible but also about producing less waste – even recyclable waste – by purchasing products with as little packaging as possible. We need to help create demand for recycled commodities by looking for packaging made from recyclable materials and buying products made entirely or mostly from recycled materials. Avoid materials that are "designed for the dump". For more information on this and other issues please check out the EPA website (<http://epa.gov/climatechange/climate-change-waste/life-cycle-diagram.html>).

South Portland Energy and Recycling Committee meets the third Wednesday of each month at the South Portland Community Center. Meetings start at 6:30 p.m. and are open to the public.