

STR branching out with what it recycles

By Kathryn Reed

No one is getting rich off recycling plastic. And come Jan. 1 with South Lake Tahoe banning grocery stores from handing out plastic bags, there is bound to be much less for South Tahoe Refuse to collect.

“Film plastic from grocery bags to trash bags for lawn maintenance to plastic film that goes around your bread is all recyclable. But it is very volatile. It is like the lowest grade of plastic besides Styrofoam,” explained John Marchini, owner of STR.

By volatile he means there isn’t much return for it per pound.

“Our brokers won’t accept it from us at times because there is no demand for it,” Marchini told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Even those blue bags are recyclable.



South Tahoe Refuse collects a substantial amount of its recyclables via blue bags.

Photo/LTN

Still, STR, like all garbage companies in California, is

required to meet certain recycling minimums. State rules are 50 percent of trash must be recycled. That percentage is slated to go to 75 percent in 2020. However, several years ago South Lake Tahoe said the rate must be 55 percent.

For the first nine months of 2013, STR is at a 63 percent compliance rate.

If people don't put their recycling in blue bags, workers on the assembly line pick out the recyclables piece by piece. The problem is they can't get everything. The blue bags come across the line separate from the garbage and are then sorted in appropriate recycling categories.

"Our employees target different material. Mixed paper is a stronger commodity and there is more of it than film plastic," Jeanne Lear with STR explained. "There is a bigger bang for the buck if we pull off cereal boxes and mixed mail."

Recycling goes well beyond what people on the South Shore put in their blue bags each week.

To get to 75 percent is going to require STR finding markets for nearly everything that comes through its doors. To increase the recycling by one percentage point it takes about 1,000 pounds of recycling.

"We are going to shoot for everything we can. Our focus over the last nine months to a year is really ramping up green, organic waste," Lear said.

Contractors are given a drop box. Bigger projects separate the debris on site, while smaller operators bring in a mixed box. STR employees then sort through the bins, putting metal, wood, asphalt and concrete into separate piles.

"Construction has good weight and we have outlets for wood and metal. We will focus on that in the winter because there is not as much yard waste in winter," Lear told *LTN*.

Insulation usually ends up at the landfill.

Drywall, though, is something the company recently started targeting. It's a material that Full Circle Compost in Minden will take.

Wood often goes to Bentley Agrowdynamics in the Carson Valley.

Dirt is another commodity STR has started recycling.

Food waste also goes to Full Circle.

STR has been working with a handful of restaurants for several years to collect food waste. Last school year Sierra House Elementary came on board. After the first of the year Bijou Community School will be part of the program.

"We just need to make sure it is done well and that kids understand the whole process and we keep contamination levels down," Lear said.

STR and Lake Tahoe Unified School District officials have talked about having a districtwide composting program. One holdback is the tipping fee at Full Circle. But if enough were recycled, then it would mean the district's garbage fee would go down so it could pencil out.