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Director Barrett Jensen is working to extend the life of Mesa County's landfill through outreach to encourage waste reduction, recycling, composting, and hazardous waste disposal.

Reducing, Recycling, Repurposing + Retrofitting Saves Local Resources

By Mike McKibbin

Photography by Cat Mayer

Trash is fun," says Mesa County Solid Waste and Sustainability Division Director Barrett Jensen.

If he's serious, Jensen may be in heaven, as the county landfill takes in around 600 tons of trash each day it operates.

"That is a large amount for a community of this size," Jensen says. Grand Valley residents throw away an average of 6.7 pounds per person each day, compared to the national average of 4.5 pounds. Over 149,000 people live in the 3,341-square-mile county and its communities. Last year the landfill, located in Grand Junction, took in 176,000 tons of trash — the most of any landfill on the Western Slope.

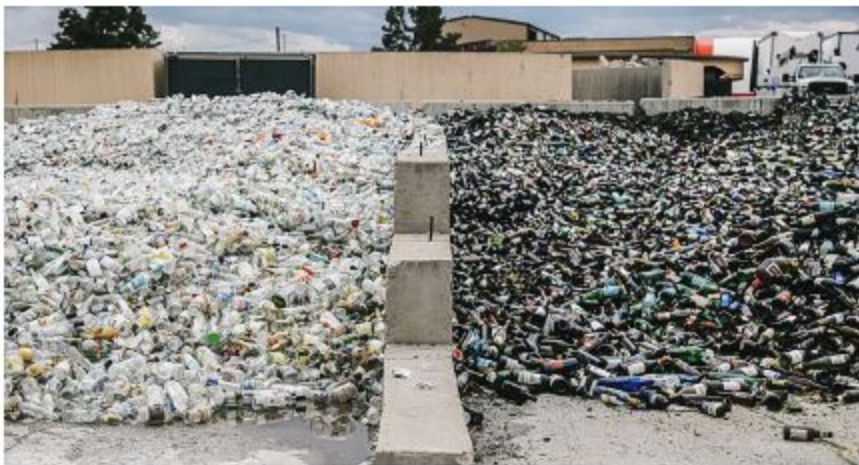
"I think it's a cultural thing," Jensen says of why county residents toss so much in the trash. "We live in a society where it's thought to be OK to throw everything away. When you look at what we buy, there is a lot of waste, and much of it ends up here."

Jensen also says a landfill that takes in a lot of waste reflects the local economy: Business growth equals more trash.

The Mesa County Landfill accepts municipal, construction and demolition waste, asbestos, and contaminated soils.

Landfills today are not just dumps, Jensen says. For instance, all landfills must place trash in lined pits to help protect groundwater. Many hazardous, electronic, and other wastes are unacceptable. Organic composting, recycling, household hazardous waste disposal are offered, and four transfer stations are also operated.

The county runs the landfill as an enterprise fund — no general fund tax money is involved.



Glass bottles are separated into clear and colored glass at Curbside Recycling indefinitely before being recycled.

Snyder says most water bottles are recycled into polyester, fleece, and carpeting. Other plastics are turned into items like plastic picnic tables. Most plastics have only one or two more lifetimes, she adds.

Metal containers, like soup cans, can be recycled many times into steel sheeting and cut to use for various items. Aluminum cans can be made into cans, siding, window frames, and other products. "Most of ours goes to an Alcoa mill in Tennessee," Snyder says.

Paper goes to several mills and can be turned into chipboard, toilet paper, and other products. Additionally, CRI gives surgical materials from Community Hospital to a non-profit group in Rifle that produces reusable cloth shopping bags from used material.

Energy Efficiency = Savings for Schools

For Mesa County Valley School District 51, recycling and energy efficiency helped avoid \$1.7 million in utility costs in fiscal year 2016-17. In the last 10 years, the district has saved more than \$11 million in utility costs.

When Energy Conservation Manager Eric Anderson began his job in 2007, the district spent \$4.2 million on utilities. Now, that amount is \$2.9 million. "We are now one of — if not the most — energy-efficient large school districts in Colorado," he says.

A 2009 energy audit led to several energy-efficiency projects in district buildings. Xcel Energy rebates, energy performance contracting through the Colorado Governor's Office, and utility savings

paid for the projects, ranging from getting more efficient boilers to swapping old bulbs for LED lighting. "As a result, we're using 35 percent less energy than we were when we started," Anderson notes.

In 2014, a solar community garden began producing 2 megawatts of electricity daily on district land in Pear Park. The district has a 40 percent share in the garden, plus some 17,000 solar panels on buildings and on the ground. Solar makes up a quarter of the district's energy portfolio.

Other projects include worm-based composting at R-5 High School, metal recycling drives at Redlands and Mt. Garfield middle schools, a zero-waste project in the Bookcliff Middle School cafeteria, and a wind turbine at the Career Center. In addition, Fruita Monument High School's agriculture program cleaned out old shop metal for a rebate from Pacific Recycling, and Central High School was recently named a Green Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

Anderson hopes to increase the district-wide recycling rate to 50 percent, partly by getting students and staff to do more recycling in school kitchens and at Stocker Stadium.

All of these efforts are required to be cost effective, Anderson says. "Very, very little capital outlay dollars were used on any of the projects."

The district is not alone in seeking solutions that are both environmentally and financially sound. Fortunately, all these local efforts are showing how sustainability can make good sense all around.

Blister Plastics 101

Not all plastics are created — or recycled — equally. One type of plastic Curbside Recycling Indefinitely in Grand Junction no longer accepts is "blister" plastic — the ridged containers used to package berries, greens, eggs, cupcakes, and other items. While a blister container may have the number 1 recycling symbol, it must be repurposed or thrown away.

As CRI explains on its website (gjcri.com), it is cheaper for manufacturers to produce blister containers using virgin materials instead of recycled blister plastic. Over the past several years, that forced domestic and foreign markets for recycled ridged plastics

into a steep decline. Now, CRI cannot find end markets for blister containers.

The bottom of most plastic containers is marked with a number from 1-7, surrounded by the "chasing arrows" recycling symbol. These resin codes, adopted in 1988, identify the type of chemical compound or resin used to produce that container. The codes were never intended to be a guarantee of recyclability for consumers, and they have caused much confusion among citizens.

Plastic containers are manufactured with different molding techniques, equipment, and chemical additives. So, for example, a blow-molded bottle cannot be combined with an

injection-molded deli tray, even one with the same resin code.

The end result is that, if a container has a number 1 but is not a bottle, jar, or jug, CRI cannot accept it. To avoid creating waste, shoppers should seek other options: Purchase unpackaged greens and other produce, buy eggs in a paperboard carton, and stop by the self-service area of the bakery for muffins and cupcakes. Consumers can also request businesses to stop using blister packaging.

Other plastic containers — soda, water and detergent bottles, milk jugs, peanut butter jars, yogurt containers, and margarine tubs — can still be recycled.



"Plastics inevitably end up as waste in landfills or the oceans," says Melissa Snyder, community outreach coordinator for Curbside Recycling Indefinitely. "Reducing our use of single-use plastics is most important. Reusing and recycling are secondary."

Teaching Kids to Care About Trash

Barrett Jensen invites 1,600 students each year to the landfill campus to talk about proper waste management, hazardous waste, composting, and recycling.

"In 24 years when this landfill closes, it is going to be up to the next generation to choose our next course of action in waste management. Our waste habits are very much cultural and learned. If we can instill the importance of waste diversion in kids now, they can create a culture in which we think about our waste and the implications of continuing to 'throw away' in Mesa County."

3 TIPS FOR REDUCING PLASTIC WASTE

- Bring reusable shopping bags.
- Carry a reusable water bottle.
- Say no to straws at restaurants.