

This is KPTZ FM 91.9 in Port Townsend, Washington. I'm Rachel Perkins, bringing you news and commentary from the Jefferson County *Beacon* for Wednesday, July 29, 2026.

When a Jefferson County resident tosses a bottle, cardboard box, or a dead battery into a recycling bin, what happens next depends heavily on which bin it landed in. According to Justin Miskell, the county solid waste operations manager, the path taken by recyclables mashes up geography, contamination, and the economics of hauling materials off a peninsula with only two ways out.

Jefferson County started implementing a new recycling collection system last week. The switch to curbside collection for all households was made largely to reduce contamination and preserve recycling as viable at all. Under the old system, unmanned drop-box recycling sites saw such high contamination – garbage dumped in with recyclables – that much of the material never got recycled at all.

The system was costing the county roughly \$350,000 a year, subsidized by the general trash fee. Jefferson was the last county in the state still doing it that way. At the transfer station's staffed recycling drop off, glass, plastic and oil all follow separate paths once they leave the county – and mixing them creates costly problems downstream. Plastic mixed into a glass bin fouls the machinery that washes and sorts glass at the receiving facility. Oil contaminated with gasoline forces an entire storage tank to be shut down, tested, and hauled by special truck.

For uncontaminated material, distance is the next obstacle. Glass, the heaviest recyclable commodity, now travels to Oregon for processing. Seattle's last receiving facilities have closed, and Miskell predicts the destination will keep shifting toward California. "At a certain point," he said, "the fuel burned hauling glass that far outweighs any environmental benefit of recycling it." Lighter materials like plastic face the opposite problem: too little weight per truckload to justify the trip economically.

Cardboard is the exception, and Miskell called it the county's most "responsible" commodity because it goes directly to the Port Townsend Paper mill rather than leaving the peninsula. Should the mill close, Miskell said replacing that destination would be a major and costly problem, since cardboard bales take up too much space per weight to be worth trucking long distances to sell.

Batteries take the most expensive route of all, at a heavy cost to the county: about \$5 per pound to dispose of, and also the leading cause of fires at the transfer station. Local businesses can route them through Battery Network, a nationwide takeback program.

Jefferson county's recycling challenges mirror those of counties across the state, which has prompted state legislation. The Recycling Reform Act, signed in May 2025, will roll out in the next few years, and rests on a policy called Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR. Instead of residents and local governments paying to manage recyclables, the companies that make the packaging and paper products will foot the bill for its end-of-life handling. Producers will be required to join a registered organization which will collect fees based on the volume and recyclability of the packaging they put into the Washington market, with higher fees charged for less-recycled materials.

In addition to these recyclables, approximately 24% of municipal garbage waste in Jefferson County is food waste, a staggering 11.5 million pounds. This problem posed an opportunity for Jefferson County resident Keith Dixon, a former mushroom farmer. Dixon created Return to Earth, a small composting service now about two and a half years into operation, and roughly seven weeks into offering the county's first residential food-scrap subscription service. Return to Earth has signed up 85 residential subscribers so far, with a goal of 200 by year's

end, and recently added its first commercial account, collecting a dozen 45-gallon carts of fish scraps weekly from a local restaurant.

Subscribers may drop off their food waste at four locations in Port Townsend into bins with a combination lock. Dixon hopes to place boxes elsewhere in the county, such as Cape George and Kala Point in the next six months. Material is processed on-site using an aerated static pile system – roughly a month of active composting followed by two more months of curing – before being screened and sold back to the community or returned to subscribers as finished compost. Learn more about Return to Earth at www.rtecompost.org.

Reporting on this story by Scott France.

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