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NORTH MASON FIBER: Environmental Stewardship Close to Home

BELFAIR — On a typical week, hundreds of tons of solid waste is hauled to Belfair and recycled into new products. As many as 150 big rigs make the trek to the North Mason Commercial and Industrial Park, where North Mason Fiber turns nearly a dozen types of solid waste, from fish waste and brush to recycled wood and land clearing debris, into 18 products, ranging from organic compost and bark to hog fuel.

Open seven days a week, the 30-acre facility is operated by three people including owner Bob Dressel and his son, Robb, with a fourth employee for administrative duties. With trucks coming and going continuously and about two dozen multi-ton piles in different degrees of “cooking,” screening or other processes, the job is very fast-paced — considering they process as much as 80,000 tons of waste a year.

From the surface, many of the piles look the same — filter barriers made of wood waste cover the actual material underneath to prevent odors. Computer programs keep track of every pile and details such as temperatures, dates and other critical factors.

The original facility was built in 1972 by Weyerhaeuser; North Mason Fiber got its start by leasing seven acres for a whole-log wood-chipping operation in the late ‘80s. In the ‘90s, the company bought 30 acres from Weyerhaeuser, later adding more land for a total of 67 acres. Some of the land is leased to other businesses.

With time, other operations were added and today North Mason Fiber has five different permits. “Everything that comes in, from the grasses to the stumps, goes out as a new product,” Dressel said. “We’re labeled as a green company because of our permits.” Some of the certifications require oral and written exams by the state, he said.

North Mason Fiber handles overflow recyclable waste from nine garbage companies from around the region, as well as wood waste from Naval Base Kitsap facilities. Recyclable waste also is accepted from the public in a special area.

U.S. Navy Capt. Mark Olson, commanding officer for Naval Base Kitsap, commended the facility after taking a tour with employee Jim Mcarey. In a letter to Dressel, he wrote that he was impressed by the operation’s strong belief in environmental stewardship. “Thank you for providing such a great service and for being at the forefront of your industry,” he wrote.

Composting Grows Popular

About 10 years ago, composting was added to the operations. “A lot of recycling and garbage companies asked us to take green waste, so we got into composting,” Dressel said.

Composting is about 15 to 18 percent of the business and uses an advanced process with exact temperatures and strict aeration techniques, and takes months — or as long as three years in the case of the fish — to complete. “It’s like making wine: The longer it ages, the better it is,” Dressel says of the fish compost.

The physical process itself is completely mechanized, and the operators use big equipment like loaders and grinders to work the recyclables mounds. Every accepted load also has to be screened for garbage. Dressel calls it beachcombing.

Under the label Oly Mountain, the organic compost and the fish compost are sold both in bulk and bags wholesale to a variety of companies, and in West Sound can be purchased for retail at many nurseries and landscape supply yards.

“I like (the compost) because it’s local and it’s a good product,” said Penny Crosswhite, who uses Oly Mountain organic compost in her garden. Crosswhite is the store manager for Belfair’s Scott McLendon Hardware, which has been selling the product for about a year along with the Fiber’s bark and fish compost, and is also using it in the store’s greenhouse.

The bagging started last year due to demand from customers who didn’t want to buy in bulk. It’s all done on site, and during peak times Dressel hires as many as four local retirees for help. He said some chains have asked him to mass-produce it, but he’s not interested.

“We don’t want to push Mother Nature. Once you do it on a large scale, you lose control (of quality),” he said.

Surprisingly, the facility doesn’t have a very high odor. Dressel said not only do they use stringent guidelines to control it, they also recruit the neighbors to report any time they think there is a problem. “My hats off to them for helping us control potential problems and being watchdogs,” he said.

The fish composting was added about five years ago, and Dressel said it came as a result of concerns about issues like the low-oxygen problem in Hood Canal. The state dumps tons of fish waste every year — and this facility helps divert as much as 110,000 pounds a week of fish waste out of the landfill. Some of it comes from offshore, but much of it is from Indian tribes, hatcheries and fish processors around the region. Unlike the rest of the recycled waste, which North Mason Fiber charges for, the company actually has to buy the fish and bid against pet-food manufacturers and others.

Growing Trend

In Washington state, the amount of waste disposed at landfills has been growing every year. In 2007, the state generated an estimated 14.51 pounds of waste per capita per day, compared to 7.69 pounds a decade before that, according to numbers from the state Department of Ecology. But while the amount of waste generated has nearly doubled, the amount of materials diverted and recycled from the landfill has tripled, from 2.08 pounds per capita per day in 1997 to 6.16 pounds in 2007.

“I think you’ll see a growing mix of facilities of different size over time,” said DOE’s Chuck Mathews, who works with composting operators. “Especially with Ecology’s Beyond Waste initiative, the interest is in diverting waste from the landfill.”

Organic waste specifically comprises about 30 percent of the waste in the state, and although recycling has grown significantly over the last few years, so has the disposal of organic waste. The Ecology’s Beyond Waste initiative includes the vision of a “full organics recovery and beneficial use” in the state in 30 years.

“Composting facilities are an important part of the infrastructure that’s need to handle waste from curbside recycling,” Mathews said. “They play a vital role and they’re very viable.”

Planning for the Future

North Mason Fiber invested \$1.5 million into a stormwater facility about 15 years ago that can handle up to 10.5 million gallons of stormwater a year — and has zero discharge. All the recycling is done on a cemented surface to help collect the water for recharging. To help position the industrial park for the next decade or so, a second stormwater-collection facility is currently under construction. It will be able to handle another 15 million gallons of water, which means more commercial growth will be possible.

In the same environmentally friendly fashion as the rest of the operations, the waste generated from construction — in this case rock and gravel — is being turned into products and sold wholesale.

Dressel wants to expand some of the North Mason Fiber operations (wood waste recycling, for example) and also feels there will be more demand for commercially leased space. “Even though the economy is unique, right now we’re still making infrastructure development. It’s a natural growth,” he said.

With two new bypasses being discussed in North Mason, the new sewer and growth at the Bremerton airport, Dressel feels this area will see big growth in the next decade or more.

In the meantime, he continues to do what he loves the best — coming in to work around 4:30 or 5 in the morning, hopping on a loader and moving from one task to the next. Working six days a week, he doesn’t carry around a cell phone and doesn’t have a computer in his office. “This is like a big box for kids to play with Tonka toys,” said Dressel, who grew up around the earth moving and fishing business. “I’m not in the office during the day — I’m on equipment, doing what I love.”

By Rodika Tollefson (C2010 Kitsap Sun - Originally published in North Mason Life)