



A PROFUSION OF PLASTIC

Most everyone agrees that reducing the amount of plastic we throw away is a good idea.

BY MELISSA SAVAGE

Against a rising tide of beverage bottles and food containers, state lawmakers, manufacturers, suppliers and trade organizations are coming up with new ways to increase recycling and reduce the amount of plastic packaging used in their states.

Americans spent \$15 billion on 8 billion gallons of bottled water in 2006. Fifty-seven percent were single-serve plastic bottles, what we usually think of when talking about “bottled water.” And according to *The Wall Street Journal*, American shoppers use about 100 million plastic bags each year at a cost of \$4 million to retailers.

Plastic bottles and bags can be reused and recycled, but most end up in landfills. Some estimates show that only 25 percent of plastic water bottles head to the recycling bin; most end up in the trash can.

Plastic containers not only increase the waste stream, they are also costly to produce. Some environmental groups estimate that 17 million barrels of oil are needed to produce the yearly consumption of water bottles—and this doesn’t include the oil used to transport the final products to stores. According to the Sierra Club, 11 million barrels of oil are needed to produce one ton of plastic grocery bags.

Bottled water companies like Nestlé Waters—maker of such brands as Arrowhead and Poland Spring—have started using spe-

cially designed bottles that use roughly half the plastic of the old ones. Other manufacturers are doing the same thing.

The sheer volume of bottled water consumed in this country and the somewhat low percentage of recycling has led the public, environmental groups, cities and states to develop ways to make recycling easier for the consumer hoping to increase the recycling rate.

STIMULATING RECYCLING

In October 2006, the American Beverage Association, the National Recycling Coalition, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the Food Marketing Institute, the Grocery Manufacturers Association and the International Bottled Water Association formed the National Recycling Partnership to let consumers know what materials can be recycled, how to do it and why it’s a good idea.

“Recycling is of vital importance to our industry, our customers and our suppliers,” says Susan K. Neely, ABA’s president and chief executive officer. “The beverage industry has a long history of involvement in recycling, and because of our commitment, we are proud to be a partner in this innovative and progressive coalition that will reinvigorate recycling in this country and further protect our environment.”

PAPER OR PLASTIC?

Because plastic bags are used in such large numbers especially in grocery stores, and because the plastic they are usually made from is environmentally inert, the bags have become a considerable source of trash. In

addition to their combined bulk, the bags can easily catch the wind and blow away, making them a common sight on otherwise natural landscapes and a hazard to aquatic, as well as terrestrial, wildlife.

But is paper better than plastic? This isn’t an easy question to answer. Paper bags are easier to recycle, but the cost of recycling can be high for both types of materials. Environmental groups advise consumers to reuse. In New York City, if one fewer plastic bag were used per person each year, waste could be reduced by 109 tons and disposal costs by \$11,000.

Despite the costs, plastic bag use is on the rise—in 1982 only 5 percent of shoppers used plastic bags compared to about 80 percent today. In response to the increased use, the disposal expense and the environmental concerns, major cities like San Francisco and Oakland have banned the use of plastic grocery bags. Some grocers have started look-



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ing at ways to reduce the number of plastic bags they use and Whole Foods completely stopped using plastic bags in April.

Some states, like Rhode Island, are considering banning them entirely. Legislation under consideration there would prohibit retail establishments from using plastic bags, but would permit bags made from biodegradable materials such as paper. Others are coming at the problem differently. New York's Senate Bill 6253 would require retailers to provide in-store recycling options for patrons who wish to return plastic bags.

Alaska Representative Andrea Doll wants to establish a fee for businesses distributing disposable plastic bags to their customers, encouraging them to use alternative means for packaging their goods. Massachusetts Senator Brian Joyce is proposing a similar bill. His, being debated right now, would tax consumers two cents for every plastic bag they use. The tax would increase to 15 cents over seven years. Joyce says the move would "persuade consumers not to choose the plastic option."

STATES PUSH RECYCLING

Over the last few years, lawmakers in several states have been working on ways to promote recycling of plastic water bottles and plastic bags. Florida is looking at legislation that would require businesses to collect recyclable containers, including plastic bottles. In Illinois, the legislature is debating a bill that would direct the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency to develop a statewide recycling program. Under proposed legislation in Kentucky, citizens would have an easier time recycling. If the bottle and the cap, for instance, are made of similar materials, they will be labeled as such, preventing sorters from having to guess.

More typical legislation requires a bottle deposit, a so-called "bottle bill," such as Arizona's House Bill 2760, which would assess a fee of five cents on each beverage bottle sold by a distributor or entertainment facility or bought by a consumer. The funds would then be used to pay for fee redemptions and incentive payments, designed to encourage recycling.

Eleven states already have bottle bills on the books. California, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, Oregon and Vermont each charge a deposit on beverage containers, as an incentive for consumers to return them.

Most set the deposit at five cents, occasionally higher for wine and liquor bottles. They differ on the details, however. Michigan sets the deposit at a flat 10 cents—producing an overall redemption rate of 97.3 percent.

Manufacturers and industry groups like the American Beverage Association agree that recycling is the right thing to do, but caution against programs such as bottle deposits that target only a small percentage of the waste stream.

Neely, with the American Beverage Association, would like to see a comprehensive curbside recycling program that makes it easy and cost-effective for everyone to recycle not only their empty water bottles, but also plastic bags, newspapers, glass and aluminum.

"We can have an impact," she says "if we all do our part to reduce waste and recycle. But we need to come up with a good recycling structure that is easy to do and keeps costs—financial and environmental—low." 