



September 30, 2009

Plastic bottle ban to begin at landfills statewide

By Clarke Morrison

A law takes effect Thursday prohibiting plastic bottles in landfills, but that doesn't mean the garbage police will be checking your trash bags.

The measure, approved by state lawmakers in 2005, is aimed at encouraging recycling and supplying plastic recyclers with the materials they need to make more bottles and other products.

Solid waste haulers in Buncombe and other counties are sending out notices telling customers about the new requirements. Officials say education is key.

Just one in five plastic bottles is recycled in North Carolina, according to the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources. About 2.4 billion bottles are buried in landfills each year.

"Nobody is going to be looking in your trash can," said Scott Mouw, the state recycling director. "The whole spirit of the law is to drive additional collection of materials and recycling behavior on the part of all of us. That's what we hope to see.

"It's kind of silly to put these materials in a hole in the ground."

The law also bans motor oil filters, oyster shells and wooden pallets from landfills.

Prompted in part by the new law, Childcare Network on Weaverville Highway north of Asheville recently decided to contract with Curbside Management, a local recycling service, to haul away the center's recyclables.

"We go through tons of milk jugs," said Sarah Nicholson, the day care center's director. "We were throwing a ridiculous amount of stuff away. I think it's great to keep that out of the landfill."

Persuading households and businesses to recycle their plastic bottles will be the job of local governments. The state already had the power to fine haulers, and the law added no new sanctions.

The county won't be going through garbage brought to the landfill by individuals but can refuse loads in commercial vehicles with large quantities of plastic, said Jerry Mears, county solid waste manager.

"We've got to do a better job of getting people educated," he said.

Fines for violators

Administrative fines can be issued for violators, said Paul Crissman, chief of the state solid waste section. Those can technically go up to \$15,000, but Crissman said because of the demand for recyclable materials and education by local officials and haulers, there should be few if any fines. And bottle fines would probably never reach the maximum amount.

The county's main waste hauler will try to keep bottles out of its trucks by keeping an eye out for the containers in regular garbage bags and working with residents and recyclers, said John O'Neal, general manager of GDS.

GDS has the contract to pick up residential waste and recycling in much of the county until Jan. 1. If haulers see bottles in regular garbage bags, they will call their recycling personnel to have them pick it up, O'Neal said.

"If our drivers notice specific customers are doing it often, we'll have a customer service representative call and talk to them," he said.

The city of Asheville has had a curbside recycling program since 1997, said Wendy Simmons, solid waste manager. The state banned putting aluminum cans in landfills several years ago.

'A good practice'

"The city encourages residents to recycle as many materials as possible," Simmons said. "This ban (on plastic) just reinforced that is a good practice for all of us."

Asheville and several other area municipalities contract with Curbside Management to collect recyclables. The materials are sorted at its facility in Woodfin, then bundled and sent to processors, owner Barry Lawson said.

"I think a number of people are already recycling plastic bottles, but there are more to capture out there in the community," he said. "We're encouraged our state is taking a stand to help reduce waste in the landfill."

"We've seen a good interest in residents and businesses that want to comply with the new law. Most people want to do the right thing."

But Mears said only about a third of residents in unincorporated areas of the county pay to have their garbage and recyclables picked up at the curb. The rest have to take their cans, glass and plastic to a recycling center if they wish to keep them out of the landfill.

Can do better

Buncombe County last year recycled about 4.1 pounds of plastic per person, slightly more than the statewide average of 3.8 pounds, according to the Department of Environment and Natural Resources.

The potential is there to do a lot better. With its comprehensive recycling programs, Orange County leads the state with more than 29 pounds recycled per person, according to state figures.

Asheville resident and recycling advocate Michael Brubaker said he liked the idea of the bottle ban but said the hard part would be enforcement. Brubaker said he takes occasional trips to the county landfill and sees cans and other recyclables dumped.

"You go up there and see people in all kinds of cars and trucks, and they just throw stuff off," he said.

Mouw said the driving force behind the new law was the strong demand for used plastic, which can be used in making everything from carpet to composite lumber to more bottles. It's less expensive and takes less energy to use existing plastic in products than creating virgin plastic.

What will be the largest plastic bottle recycling facility in the world is under construction in

Fayetteville, Mouw said. The plant will have the capacity to use 280 million pounds of bottles a year.

“The demands for the materials is really huge,” he said. “Widespread compliance with the plastic bottle disposal ban will ensure a flow of plastic bottles to meet market demand for the materials and will result in additional job creation through the expansion of recycling collection companies.”

Additional Facts

Answers to questions about recycling plastic bottles:

Do I have to rinse out the bottles?

No, but it's best to dump the liquid, and to rinse them if you can.

Do I have to remove the paper from the bottle or can?

No, just place the bottle or can in the recycling.

Do I need to remove the lid?

Yes, because lids can be violently projected when plastics are bailed into cubes for sale to market.

Does the number or the recycling symbol on the bottle matter?

Not really: Just make sure the plastic bottle has a neck that is smaller than the base. If so, it's recyclable.

Am I going to get a ticket if I don't recycle a plastic bottle?

No. Individuals will not be inspected, but solid waste inspectors will enforce the law during landfill inspections. Please recycle and help the county avoid penalties or fines.

Where can I recycle?

If you're a Buncombe County resident, you have access to curbside service with the local franchised waste hauler. The local waste hauler provides both garbage and recycling service for county residents. The hauler picks up recycling in blue bags. Residents can fill their blue bags with plastic bottles along with other recyclables — aluminum cans, steel cans, mixed paper and glass — and put it out on the curb next to your garbage can. Municipalities also offer curbside pickup. Those don't subscribe to a hauling service may use any of the county's convenience centers to drop off your recycling. The convenience centers are behind Earth Fare at the Westgate Shopping Center, at the county Transfer Station off Brevard Road, at the county landfill off Riverside Drive and behind Asheville Pizza on Merrimon Avenue.
