

New law: They don't take plastic

Starting this Thursday, N.C. is outlawing plastic bottles in landfills. But recycling rangers likely won't bust you.

By Lynn Bonner
lynn.bonner@newsobserver.com
Posted: Monday, Sep. 28, 2009

More Information

What counts as a 'plastic bottle'?

The law specifies a recyclable "rigid plastic container" where the neck is smaller than the body and is closed with a screw top, snap cap or other closure. For recycling purposes, a motor oil bottle is not a bottle.

The law

Passed in 2005, the law bans plastic bottles, motor oil filters, oyster shells and wooden pallets from landfills.

Wooden pallets can go to special landfills that take construction and demolition debris.

The state already had the ability to fine haulers. The law added no new sanctions.

The law goes into effect Oct. 1.

Public service announcements, fliers, and corporate-gift cards are all aimed at getting N.C. households to comply with a state law kicking in Thursday that bans plastic bottles from landfills.

But don't look for the trash cops if soda bottles end up in your garbage cans.

"That's not the spirit of the law," said Scott Mouw, the state's recycling director. "Clearly, this is more of a law of spirit or intent, everyone recognizing the positive reasons to recycle."

State enforcement efforts will be targeted at haulers who show up at landfills with loads of banned material. Most local governments don't have the power or the interest in dogging residents who don't recycle.

Charlotte's Solid Waste Services department does not conduct enforcement, spokeswoman Brandi Williams said. "It's a state law, so it is on them to enforce it," Williams said.

Charlotte offers a volunteer recycling program in which households place certain items in red bins and workers collect them weekly. Workers who pick up recycling sort the plastic, metal and paper at the curb.

Starting next July in Charlotte, recycling will be collected every other week, instead of weekly. The city is trading the red recycling bins for larger rolling containers similar to its trash cans. Workers will dump everything into trucks, and the plastic-metal-paper sorting will be at an automated facility.

The move is part of a plan to save about \$26 million over 10 years.

Without enforcement efforts, though, North Carolina's embrace of recycling has been more of a half-hug.

North Carolina missed a 10-year recycling goal it set back in 1991 for reducing trash disposal. In fact, more trash went to landfills, not less. Garbage disposal went from 1.01 tons per person in 1992 to 1.21 tons per person by June 2001.

The state now has a new goal: Recycle 2 million tons of bottles, cans, and other materials each year by 2012. N.C. residents currently recycle about 1.3 million tons a year.

The state recycles fewer than one in five bottles, Mouw said, and he's sure that rate can go up.

One of the state's new tactics to persuade people to keep plastic out of the trash is to focus on the empty bottles as a raw material for the state recycling industry. The state has plants that are a step in the manufacturing chain that turns used bottles into new bottles and other materials. The largest plastics recycling plant in the nation is to open in Fayetteville next year.

Though state law bars specific materials from landfills - such as aluminum cans, big appliances and tires - recycling practices vary across the state and are largely governed by local ordinance.

Some communities, such as Orange County and Cary, constantly add items to their list of recyclables, while other localities make a more limited effort.

Orange County, which includes Hillsborough and Chapel Hill, recycled more plastic per person than any other county last year, according to state figures. Orange residents recycled about 29.5 pounds of plastic bottles per person in 2007-08.

Pamlico County was the next closest with 14.8 pounds per person. The state average was 3.8 pounds per person.

"People across the county have a really high recycling ethic," said Blair Pollock, Orange County's solid waste planner.

Four counties didn't collect plastic for recycling. Some of the state's municipalities - Kannapolis being the largest - don't have curbside recycling, Mouw said.

Katie Burdett, who wrote about plastics recycling as a requirement for her master's in public administration from UNC Chapel Hill this year, said the state would need to require recycling and develop an enforcement strategy to maximize the ban's impact.

Local communities' recycling success largely depends on the commitment of those in charge of running it, said Burdett, who interned in the state recycling office. Communities that do best have someone whose sole job it is to encourage recycling, keep in touch with major garbage producers and watch the recycling markets, she said.