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## Plastic bottles banned from landfills

By **Francis X. Gilpin**  
Staff writer

One of America's biggest plastic bottle recycling plants is set to open in Fayetteville next year.

It better not be counting on the surrounding area for raw material.

Seven of the Cape Fear region's 10 counties, including Cumberland County, finished in the bottom third of North Carolina counties for recycling plastic bottles last year.

The region has nowhere to go but up. A state law taking effect Thursday could help. Recyclable plastic bottles with screw tops or snap caps will be banned from landfills.

In a region where tons of the bottles apparently end up in landfills every year, will people who don't find it easy being green have anything to worry about?

Enforcement of the law is critical, said Ron Salati, general manager of Clear Path Recycling LLC, which is building the Fayetteville plant.

"It's going to be a difficult task," said Salati.

Others outside government are more skeptical.

On the Web site of the political-chat television show "NC Spin," a blogger asked: "What good does it do to pass a law requiring citizens to recycle plastic bottles if there is no penalty when they don't?"

The legal burden will fall largely on landfill operators rather than consumers.

"There's not going to be a recycling police," said Jerry Dietzen, head of Fayetteville's Environmental Services Department.

The N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources will watch for large quantities of plastic bottles being dumped in landfills, said state recycling coordinator Scott Mouw.

If a waste hauler is spotted with a lot of bottles to dump, Dietzen said, state inspectors will try to trace the load to find out who threw the containers in the trash. The inspectors will acquaint those responsible with the new law, Dietzen said.

But inspectors may sanction landfill operators for disposal violations, Mouw said, just like the state does now for windblown debris or polluted groundwater.

Salati said Clear Path will accept any help it can get. "Anything that's kept out of a landfill is additional product that's available for recycling for us," he said.

### County rankings

The latest state figures suggest Cumberland County could be doing more for the new hometown business.

The county recycled barely half a pound of plastic bottles per resident in 2008. That was 87th out of 100 counties in the state.

Orange County led the state by reclaiming nearly 30 pounds per resident.

But those figures are more than a year old, covering a 12-month period that ended June 30, 2008. Fayetteville started a successful curbside recycling program the following week.

Dietzen promised that Cumberland County's 2009 numbers will improve. "Ours are going to go way up with the next report," he said.

That report, due in December, will cover a period that coincides with the first year that the city picked up recyclable material at single-family residences.

Besides curbside pickup, Dietzen said, the city has begun collecting plastic bottles from public buildings and will start doing the same at athletic fields this fall.

The best bottle recyclers in the Cape Fear region were in Scotland County. More than 5 pounds of bottles were recovered last year for every county resident, good for 26th place in the state.

"It has to start with the county commissioners," said J.R. Horne, Scotland County's recycling coordinator.

Horne estimated that 80 percent of Scotland County residents recycle household waste weekly.

At the other end of the regional scale is Harnett County, where a task force reported last year that just 20 percent of residents visited recycling drop-off locations.

That might explain why Harnett County had just about the worst rate of bottle recycling in the state last year. Four smaller rural counties that don't recycle plastic bottles or failed to report to the state finished below Harnett County.

Jerry Blanchard, director of the Harnett County General Services Department, blamed the state reporting process.

Harnett County accepts commingled material at its seven drop-off locations. So, Blanchard said, the county has trouble reporting the volume of bottles or aluminum cans that are recycled because the waste arrives mixed together.

Nevertheless, Harnett County also fared poorly when all recyclable material is considered. Last year, only Robeson County recycled less total material than Harnett County in the Cape Fear region.

Jon Parsons, executive director of the regional environmental group Sustainable Sandhills, said Harnett County has increased the number of materials accepted for recycling as a result of the recycling task force's work.

"I expect that Harnett's ranking will also improve in the next year's report," Parsons said in an e-mail, "although I wouldn't expect as much improvement as Cumberland's."

## **Nationwide trends**

Harnett County isn't out of step with the rest of the country. Americans recycle less than 25 percent of their plastic bottles.

Salati said recycling rates jump above 60 percent in states with bottle-deposit laws, such as California and New York.

Weak as North Carolina's new law is, Salati said his company is glad for it.

Unfortunately for Clear Path, increased recycling in the vicinity of the new plant won't boost efficiency much.

By 2012, when the plant is expected to be fully operational, it will be able to handle 20 percent of all polyethylene terephthalate bottles, or PET, that are recycled in the nation. PET bottles have the number 1 embossed on the bottom.

The Fayetteville plant will be capable of handling 280 million pounds of the bottles in a year. The recycled material will go into polyester-based products made by Clear Path's owners, Charlotte-based DAK Americas LLC and Shaw Industries Group Inc. of Georgia.

Yet even if Clear Path recycled every PET bottle discarded in the state, Salati said, the plant would still operate at less than half of its capacity.

Clear Path will need to bring in plastic bottles from 48 of the 50 states, he said.

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#### Jeff Savard

Seems very simple to me--- Put a deposit on the bottles like many other states do. North Carolina has too many unenforced/unenforceable laws now. Before passing any more new laws lets start enforcing the ones already in existence.

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