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N.C. plastics ban can save jobs, money and the environment, officials say

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Starting next Thursday, North Carolina is going to take a novel approach toward reducing what it buries in its landfills.

Instead of recycling plastic simply because it's the right thing to do, the state is banning plastic bottles from the waste stream because it's the economic thing to do.

"When the General Assembly passed this law, it was really about the recyclables being a commodity," said Scott Mouw, the state's recycling director. "Former rules were meant to keep out things that were toxic or dangerous if buried in the ground. But this is about keeping and producing jobs here in North Carolina."

You might not think it when you're chugging your bottled water, but recycled plastic is big business, with pieces of old bottles and containers showing up in everything from carpets and composite lumber to flower pots and new Coke bottles.

It's a wanted commodity because it's cheaper and takes less energy to use existing plastic in products than creating virgin plastic, even if the quality of the existing plastic might not always be as high as the new stuff.

Right now, however, a large chunk of the country's recycled bottle inventory goes to China, even as some industries beg for a steady local supply.



Photo by Matt Born

Workers separate plastic bottles into a trailer Wednesday at the Department of Environmental Management's WASTEC facility off U.S. 421. Beginning Oct. 1 it will be illegal to throw away plastic bottles.

But the hurdles to getting more plastic out of the waste stream remains the same with all recycling efforts: Persuading people to recycle and having the infrastructure – and demand – to handle it.

The answer to the latter question is, in part, rising just outside Fayetteville, where DAK Americas and carpet manufacturer Shaw Industries are building the nation's largest plastic bottle recycling plant in the country.

Once it opens next year, the Clear Path Recycling plant is expected to recycle 280 million pounds of plastic annually – the equivalent of 5 billion plastic bottles.

Clear Path is just the largest example of several businesses around the state that are part of the supply chain involved in making something new out of something old.

With North Carolinians tossing away more than 80 percent of the nearly 144,000 tons of plastic bottles generated in the state, according to state environmental officials, there's a huge internal market that could be tapped to meet this growing "green" demand.

And as more people recycle more stuff, economies of scale begin to kick in and the costs of running recycling programs drop.

No 'trash police'

Getting that message out there through awareness and education is the key point of the new ban rather than unleashing the "trash police" on unsuspecting homeowners.

That's largely because while the state can pass laws banning specific materials from landfills, such as aluminum cans and big appliances, recycling programs – and enforcement – are handled at the local level.

Few local officials want to dedicate personnel and generate enormous amounts of public ill will.

"That's why we want this to be an educational issue," Mouw said. "We want people to know the economic consequences of not throwing their bottle away."

He added that officials will likely start by querying haulers if they notice a number of banned items start showing up in trucks arriving at landfills, with the haulers then educating their customers on what can't be thrown away.

But increased recycling isn't without its costs.

New Hanover schools intend to roll out 96-gallon wheeled bins in all of its 45 buildings to collect plastic bottles.

But the program is expected to cost an estimated \$23,000, which will come out of the schools' maintenance budget.

Cost is the primary reason the schools don't have a comprehensive district-wide recycling program already in place.

"But eventually, as there are more and more restrictions on what can be put into the regular waste stream, it will save us money down the road because we'll be paying for less to be dumped in the landfill," said Chris Peterson, head of maintenance operations.

During good economic times, a chunk of a recycling programs costs can be covered by reselling the recycled goods.

But 2009 isn't a good year.

Lynn Bestul, New Hanover's recycling coordinator, said the county was getting \$200 a ton for recycled plastics this time last year.

That fell to \$20 a ton last October when the whole economy seized up.

Now it's back up to \$35 a ton, which doesn't come close to covering the program's operational costs.

"But if you look at all of the other ramifications of it going into the landfill and taking up space, then it is cost-effective," Bestul said.

Already, plastic recycling is beginning to surge as people begin recycling more in general – up 71 percent in New Hanover over the past two years.

Plastic recycling jumped from 212 tons in fiscal year 2007-08 to 338 tons last fiscal year.

If the ban produces a surge of plastic at the county's five recycling drop-off sites, Bestul said the county will tweak its program by adding Dumpsters or increasing pickup frequencies to keep space available.

Bill Reed, superintendent of Wilmington's solid waste program, said he's also seen growing interest in the city's voluntary curbside recycling program, for which people have to sign up to receive bins.

Mouw said everyone knows recycling is good for the environment.

But now not tossing that plastic bottle away can also help keep and generate jobs here at home, which isn't something to sneeze at considering the current economic climate.

"It just makes sense on many levels these days not to just throw that empty bottle in your trash can," Mouw said.