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New NC law to encourage recycling helps on many fronts

According to the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources, only one in five plastic bottles is recycled in North Carolina, dumping about 2.4 billion bottles in our landfills each year. North Carolina can do better, and a new state law went into effect Thursday to help in that effort. The law, passed in 2005, also bans motor oil filters, oyster shells and wooden pallets from the Tar Heel State's landfills, but the plastic bottle ban is the part of the law that will touch most of us.

The new law has the potential to extend the life spans of North Carolina's landfills, supply N.C.'s growing recycling industry with more materials and create jobs.

Enforcement of the new law will mostly fall on haulers bringing large volumes of trash to the landfills. Jerry Mears, Buncombe County solid waste manager, said 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. Citizens needn't worry about the bottle police rummaging through our trash while it sits by the road awaiting pickup.

"Nobody is going to be looking in your trash can," says 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." Mears points out that only about a third of the residents in unincorporated areas of the county currently pay to have curbside garbage and recycling pickup. The rest have to take their cans, glass and plastic to a recycling center if they wish to keep them out of the landfill.

That's an issue that lawmakers should look into as well. When it comes to recycling, most people want to do the right thing, and are willing to do so if officials make it easy for them. Currently, recycling can be done behind Earth Fare at the Westgate Shopping Center on I-240, at the County Transfer Station off Brevard Road and the landfill off Riverside Drive in north Buncombe, and there is a drop center behind Asheville Pizza on Merrimon Avenue. More drop-off centers, especially in the more rural areas of the county, will make it easier for residents to do the right thing.

Another benefit of the ban will be the boost to the plastics recycling industry. According to Mouw, one of the main reasons behind the new law was an increasing demand for used plastic for making everything from carpet to composite lumber to more bottles. Using recycled bottles is less expensive and takes less energy than creating virgin plastic. What will be the largest plastic bottle recycling facility in the world is under construction in Fayetteville. The plant will have the capacity to use 280 million pounds of bottles a year in the manufacture of carpet.

"The demands for the materials is really huge," Mouw 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." More landfill space, a boon to a burgeoning industry and job creation ... what's not to like? Well done, legislators.
