

North Carolina Plastic Bottle Ban Has Residents Scrambling

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Most North Carolinians are probably aware certain items don't go in the household trash. Tires, old appliances, and motor oil are specifically banned from landfills in the state, and others such as car batteries carry disposal fees at the point of purchase.

Starting October 1, though, the General Assembly made it illegal to throw a plastic milk jug or an empty ketchup bottle in the garbage, too.

While the law's penalties are vague and directed at the companies and municipalities that actually take trash to the landfill, the new rule expects every citizen to separate certain classes of plastic containers from their household trash and redirect them to recycling programs, even if local authorities don't offer such a program or the program is distant or inconvenient.

Reluctant to Recycle

According to the state's Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance (DPPEA), an agency of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources, only 20 percent of plastic bottles are being recycled, "despite [the state] hosting some of the largest processors of these materials."

Scott Mouw, the environmental supervisor for DPPEA, said in a press release, "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." He called the ban "a major growth opportunity for the state's recycling businesses and for local government recycling collection programs as well."

Lack of Convenience

The plastic bottle ban was an amendment to existing landfill restrictions, passing the General Assembly by near-unanimous votes before being signed into law.

Although the law took effect in October, it has been on the books since 2005. The statute contains other restrictions on discarded televisions and computer equipment that take effect in 2011, stemming from a different bill.

Some North Carolina counties and cities have extensive recycling programs, including curbside pickup and city-supplied recycling bins provided to residents.

The town of Smithfield, for instance, recently resumed curbside service, which had been cancelled several years ago. Until recently, residents who wanted to recycle took their materials to a truck parked at the town's complex near the water treatment plant. Convenience centers, including one in a business district along U.S. Highway 301 in Smithfield, are reserved for county residents with proper stickers.

Citizens Express Frustration

Other areas don't offer comparable convenience, and while some homeowners are enthusiastic about the new law, others express frustration at the effort required to comply.

Jen Froio in Granville County said she recycles as a matter of conscience, "but I absolutely despise it!" Her town does not offer curbside pickup, she said, and the collection center is "teeming with flies" and does not accept mixed recyclables, forcing her to sort her garbage or find another drop-off point.

"I have found a recycling center in another county that does accept commingled recyclables," Froio said. "I drive there every other month or so, wasting about two gallons of gas in my effort to preserve the environment. Ironic? I think so."

Others shared similar stories. Elayne Humphrey moved from Cary to north Fayetteville five years ago and found recycling required a 20-minute drive to the downtown collection center. When gas prices peaked, she decided it was too expensive to continue.

Impact Unpredictable

Lowell Shaw oversees the recycling programs in Wake County from his position as solid waste facilities manager. Wake has 11 convenience centers scattered around the county and open to all--but only--Wake residents. He said it's too soon to tell the impact of the new bottle ban.

"To be honest, this is still relatively new," Shaw said. "It took effect in October, so there's no data yet to see if there's a difference in volume. The infrastructure is there to handle it, though, and we definitely do want them to recycle their bottles."