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Plastic bottle ban tough to police, but getting results

By Bibeka Shrestha • Staff Writer

It may be illegal to throw away plastic bottles in North Carolina these days, but don't expect a landfill patrol to start picking through your trash any time soon.

The state is still trying to divine how exactly to enforce the law, even though it's been three months since the ban on plastic bottles in landfills went into effect.

"There was no way that I or my attendants were going to play trash police," said Joel Ostroff, Macon County's recycling coordinator. "Nobody in their right mind would sit there and say 'Oh yeah, we're going to have you go through every bag that comes in.'"

For now, the game plan for recycling directors involves more encouragement than punishment. They've been educating residents on the law rather than threatening them with fees for noncompliance.

"We believe we'll get better cooperation if we're not forcing people to do it, but are asking them to join us and cooperate with us," said Ostroff.

That strategy has worked well so far, as recycling directors in WNC reported residents are increasingly recycling plastic.

"We've increased our amount of plastic by a ton a week," said Stephen King, recycling director for Haywood County.

"People are recycling probably twice as much plastic as they were initially," said Charles Bailey, supervisor of Swain County Waste Management.

Before the law went into effect, less than one out of every five plastic bottles were recycled in the state.

State lawmakers passed the plastic ban primarily to meet growing demand from companies that utilize recycled plastic in North Carolina and the Southeast. Rather than buying the plastic from elsewhere, these companies could use recycled plastic generated in state.

But there were other motives for passing the law, including environmental benefits and job creation.

"We support a lot of American jobs through it," King said, adding that Haywood has five full-time positions devoted to recycling.

While landfills can be fined up to \$15,000 for not complying with regulations, including the plastic bottle ban, incidental amounts of plastic are allowed.

"It's extremely unlikely that anybody from the state will look inside anybody's individual trash cans," said Steve Mouw, the state's recycling director. "[But we] may start looking at loads of garbage from commercial facilities."

Initially, there was confusion over whether the law would apply in places like Swain and Jackson counties, which ship their trash out of state rather than operating a local landfill. But the ban does apply to transfer stations where trash is collected before being shipped out, Mouw said. No North Carolinian is exempt from the ban.

King said many have called him confused about the law, and others have even tried to hide plastic bottles in their trash bags, which puzzled King.

"It takes more effort to hide it than recycle," King said.

For those who are regularly mystified about what can be recycled and what can't, King has a general recommendation.

"When in doubt, put it in the recycling bin," said King. "If it's definitely something we can use, we'll use it."

Associated Packaging Technologies in Waynesville, which uses recycled soda and water bottles to make frozen food trays and bowls, is anxious to see how the law impacts business.

"We're cautiously optimistic on how it pans out," said Tony Gallo, director of sustainability for the company. The state is right to treat bottles as a resource, Gallo added.

"You can either reuse that resource or you can do what we've done historically and that's bury it in the ground...that's a waste," said Gallo. "We've invested a lot of resources to make it the first time and to be able to reuse it is the right way to go."

The never-ending battle

While many recycling coordinators regularly make presentations to schools and businesses, certain demographics still aren't getting the message.

"There's always those people you're never going to reach no matter what you do," said Joel Ostroff, Macon County's recycling coordinator.

The worst recyclers, according to Ostroff, are between 18 and 40, since that age demographic is more likely to be focusing on careers and raising families than recycling.

The solution lies in educating students early on about the benefits of recycling, so that more adults retain the recycling habit throughout their lifetimes, Ostroff said. The earlier students are educated about recycling, the more likely they are to retain their recycling habit.

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