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As Recycling Mandate Looms, Dare County is Ready

By Catherine Kozak, The Virginian-Pilot, Norfolk, Va.

Sep. 20--In a state where residents throw out four out of five plastic bottles, Dare County is considerably ahead of the recycling curve.

That could serve it well when a new state law goes into effect next week that bans disposal of plastic bottles in landfills.

The new law will also ban disposal of wooden pallets and oil filters in the landfills.

Dare County ranks 10th in the state's 100 counties in the rate of per-capita plastic bottle recovery, according to state figures.

"I think one of the things that contributes to Dare County's rate is that they have a really good recycling program in place," said Chris Frazier, public information officer for the state Division of Pollution Prevention and Environmental Assistance.

The law will be enforced through state inspections at public and private landfills, she said, and, if necessary, fines can be issued. Waste haulers will be held responsible for any large disposal of plastic bottles, which puts the onus on local governments, Frazier said.

The penalties issued are up to the inspector, said Jim Hickman, the division's local government assistance team leader. The action they take would depend on the frequency and the severity of the violation, he said.

Carl Walker, the county's recycling coordinator, said that he has no plans to inspect each property's garbage can, but he will inspect commercial waste containers.

"The residential -- you've just got to hope and pray that people obey the law," he said.

Walker said he will randomly check large trash bins to look for excessive numbers of plastic bottles, but he expects to discuss any problems with violators.

"It's all new," Walker said. "My whole thing is to work with these businesses."

Walker said that, last year, Dare collected 68 tons of mixed plastics, mostly the No. 1 plastic, used for water bottles, or the No. 2 plastic, commonly used for milk and laundry detergent. The county also recently started accepting No. 3 to No. 7 plastic bottles, he said.

In July, he said, mixed plastic, excluding plastic wrap or bags, was selling for 5 cents to 10 cents a pound, with the No. 1 plastic bottles reaping the larger amount.

With new recycling programs implemented this summer with Sun Realty, an Outer Banks vacation property management company, and last week in Dare County Schools, the amount of recycled plastic in the county will only grow, Walker said.

Ervin Bateman, owner of Sugar Creek Soundfront Seafood Restaurant in Nags Head, said that his "constantly slammed" restaurant got in the habit of recycling with last year's disposal ban on glass ABC bottles.

"It's just another thing that we have to do as taxpayers and businesspeople," he said. "And we accept the responsibility."

Mike Kelly, owner of three Outer Banks restaurants, said that plastic is not as much of an issue as glass is at his establishments, but it will be added to the list of items that are already recycled.

"I'm sure there will be some things that need to be worked out within the industry," he said, "and the business community will be able to deal with this judiciously."

By forbidding the bottles in the landfill, the law is aiming to stop what state lawmakers view as a loss of potential revenue, said Scott Mouw, the state recycling director.

Recycling is not only good for the environment, he said; it is also a booming business and an opportunity to create jobs in the state.

The poor recovery rate of plastic in North Carolina and other states often forces recycling companies to operate under capacity, he said. Clear Path, a new facility being built in Fayetteville, will have the capacity to use 280 million pounds of No. 1 bottles annually. The company, Mouw said, will convert the bottles into polyester that will be used in carpet. There is also another company in Reidsville that recycles No. 2 bottles.

"The loss of this material prevents us from growing our economy," he said. "The main reason the General Assembly passed this bill is they saw plastic bottles not as waste, but as a commodity."

Aluminum cans -- also banned from landfills in North Carolina -- can sell for as much as \$800 a ton, he said, and mixed paper can be sold for \$50 to \$75 a ton. The state already has 70 companies that recycle pallets, employing about 1,000 workers.

Mouw said he hopes that, rather than seeing what they can get away with, the public will embrace the new plastic-bottle ban as a helpful and necessary change. Keeping recyclables out of the landfill also saves money, he said, by reducing the need for more space -- a reality the northeastern states had to confront decades ago.

"We don't have a disposal crisis now, but we could in 30 years," Mouw said. "The landfills of the future are going to be in rural North Carolina.

"This is kind of a nice test of human nature," he said, "whether people can embrace what's good for them, rather than respond to a crisis."

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