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## Rural residents find that complying with the landfill bottle ban takes some work

By Wesley Young | Journal Reporter

### NO PICKUP SERVICE: BOTTLES MUST BE TAKEN TO RECYCLING CENTERS

On Oct. 1, North Carolina became one of the first states in the Southeast to ban plastic bottles in landfills.

The ban, passed by the General Assembly in 2005, was designed to reduce energy consumption, lower greenhouse-gas emissions, and give economic incentives to businesses that process the bottles into other materials.

But the ban presents a challenge for some, especially those who live in rural or unincorporated areas.

Chris Parrish found that out quickly.

Parrish is the president of Rural Garbage Services Inc., which picks up trash in eastern Forsyth County.

People started calling him after the ban took effect, asking what to do with their bottles.

Although Winston-Salem residents can toss their plastic bottles into a recycling bin and have them picked up by the city, that service isn't available to people in rural areas.

There are no curbside recycling programs in rural and unincorporated areas in the county. And when the state banned plastic bottles from landfills, no one mandated that recycling service be extended to those who didn't have it.

In order to recycle their plastics, people in those areas would have to take them to one of the county's three recycling centers.

Parrish came up with a solution for his customers: His company would pick up the bottles from its customers for free.

"I, myself, am an environmentalist and have been recycling for many years," Parrish said.

"As a company, we started telling customers of the three recycling centers, and we told them that we would be willing to take them on normal pickup days."

County officials are mulling a plan to require all garbage haulers that serve unincorporated areas to offer recycling, but it is still in the early stages.

"A lot of people never thought about recycling until they were told they had to," said Minor Barnette, the environmental health supervisor for Forsyth County. "Now they know they have three places to go, and they're not happy that they have to go to the trouble. People started calling me, and they

started calling their garbage haulers. Some of them were not real happy."

## **Versatile plastic**

Plastic bottles are big business, said Scott Mouw, the state's recycling director.

And the ban, introduced by Rep. Joe Hackney, D-Chatham, is expected to be a boon for recycling processors in the state.

North Carolina has some of the largest processors, including a Clear Path plant under construction in Fayetteville that will have the capacity to use 280 million pounds of a certain kind of plastic bottle.

One of the country's largest recyclers of high-density bottles, Envision Plastics, has a plant in Reidsville.

"Plastic bottles have an amazing market," Mouw said. "That is the reason the disposal ban was put in place, so we could feed those bottles into that market. One out of two bottles goes to China. Domestic recyclers have to fight for that material."

The plastic bottles can be converted into all kinds of items: strapping, flower pots, tiles, garbage carts and plastic furniture. Plastic bottles can even become new plastic bottles.

Despite all their uses, there are still problems.

Plastic bottles are too cheap and lightweight to make it profitable for individuals to collect them and turn them in for money. The bottles have to be compacted into bulk material before the plastic is shipped off to companies that make use of the material, recycling officials said.

"At the household level, the value is nowhere near breaking even," Mouw said. "The reason is that there are a lot of costs associated with the trucks and crews to retrieve the material."

Barnette said that county officials aren't sure how much it would cost homeowners to have recycling added to their garbage service, but estimated that it could be about \$4 to \$8 a month. Currently, people in unincorporated areas pay \$14.45 a month just to have their garbage picked up.

And even in Winston-Salem, recycling does not pay for itself. In fact, that has been a sore point between county and city officials because the city uses tipping fees at the landfill to subsidize curbside recycling for city residents.

Of course, recycling does extend the life of landfills by keeping materials out of them.

More plastic bottles have been dropped off at the county's three centers since the landfill bottle ban was imposed, according to the City-County Utilities Division. From a monthly average of around 14,000 pounds of plastic for the period from September 2008 to September 2009, collections have risen to an average of about 19,000 a month for the first three months since the ban went into effect.

"Is that going to continue? That is probably a function of education," said Janis McHargue, the solid-waste administrator for the utilities division.

## Hard law to enforce

Officials say that the main point of the new law is encourage recycling rather than to clamp down hard on violators. In fact, it is a difficult law to enforce because people who throw away plastic bottles can simply put them in their garbage, and trash haulers don't inspect what they pick up.

Mouw said that inspectors do check garbage loads and look over landfills, although they are not going to worry about the odd bottle here and there. Depending on the scope of the violation, the state can impose a warning or fine against a hauler or landfill operator.

Winston-Salem statistics don't show a large leap since the bottle ban went into effect, but then, city residents are long used to recycling. Derek Owens, the recycling- program administrator for the city, said that the demand for recycling bins is way up since the bottle ban took effect. Owens said that the city has a recycling participation rate of 84 percent.

The curbside option, where it exists, boosts the number of people recycling, said Richard Whisnant, a professor of public law and government at the UNC School of Government in Chapel Hill. Whisnant said that studies have shown that convenience makes a big difference.

"It's common sense," he said. "How usable is the container? How big is it? How hard is it to get to the curb?"

Daren Bakst, the director of legal and regulatory studies for the conservative John Locke Foundation, called the bottle ban a "bad law" because it puts the government into a field that should be left to the free market.

"It's unenforceable," Bakst said. "I don't think there should be any mandates. If there is a market for it, there is a market for it."

Parrish said he plans to keep picking up his customers' plastic bottles at no extra charge -- for now.

"I thought I would be doing a service for our customers," Parrish said. "We are doing this until we come up with a better solution."

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