

Finding ways to keep waste local



Americans throw away an estimated 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour, so you'd think we'd have enough raw materials for recyclable products. Sam Eaton explores the issue behind the waste and how Obama's stimulus plan may help.

TEXT OF STORY

STEVE CHIOTAKIS:

You're probably not buying much of anything these days. Spending is way down. But you know what's way up? The amount of used paper, glass and cans in warehouses across the country. Some say it could be a "green" opportunity, if Congress and President-elect Obama would take a look at it. From the Marketplace Sustainability Desk, here's Sam Eaton.

Peninsula Packaging's finished product contains about 70 percent recycled bottles. Ed Byrne, the company's owner, hopes to get that number to 100 percent. (Sam Eaton / Marketplace)

SAM EATON:

Ed Byrne manages Peninsula Packaging in California's central valley. His company makes all those clamshell packages berries and lettuce come in. But instead of making them out of petroleum like his competitors, Byrne prefers to use shredded water bottles.

ED BYRNE: It's mother's milk for us, although it's garbage to anybody else.

And you'd think Byrne would be awash in the stuff, given that Americans throw away an estimated 2.5 million plastic bottles every hour. The problem is most of the facilities that clean and shred those bottles into plastic flakes are overseas.

BYRNE:

We're buying some from China and we have some coming in from South America, and we're still using a lot more virgin resin than we'd like to because we can't get enough flake.

Byrne says his goal is to use 100 percent recycled plastic to make his product. But Alex Helou with the Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation says the economics of the global supply chain have worked against him.

ALEX HELOU:

When the oil market was at all-time high, it was cheaper for us to take a ton of recyclables from the Port of Los Angeles, ship it all the way to China, verses to take one ton of recyclables from the Port of Los Angeles and ship it to Riverside.

Even though Riverside is only 60 miles away. But with the Chinese market for recyclables now in the dumps, Helou says places like Riverside are starting to look more promising.

HELOU:

We need to find markets in California, in the United States, where a lot of these products could be recycled locally and put money back into the local economy.

And this is where President-elect Barack Obama's stimulus package comes in.

Gerry Powell is with the industry magazine Resource Recycling. He says with a little federal help, all of that recyclable material stacking up in warehouses could be put to use.

When you land in an airplane at the Phoenix airport, you're landing on cement made with rubber tires. In Baltimore, there's miles and miles of streets that have glass in the asphalt replacing rock.

Powell says true recycling isn't what happens at the bin, it's what happens at the mill where the things we recycle are made anew. And he says infrastructure projects like these would ensure more of those mills, and the jobs they create, are located here in the U.S.

In Los Angeles, I'm Sam Eaton for Marketplace.

COMMENTS

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By Pat Franklin
From Fernandina Beach, FL, 01/08/2009

Dear Sam, The problem is not lack of markets. The problem is a lack of adequate collection infrastructures. At the end of 2006, there were 14 reclamation plants in the US producing clean flake from PET post consumer plastic bottles. They can't get enough scrap bottles. Besides a stimulous package, the US Congress needs to pass the Bottle Recycling Climate Protection Act introduced last year by Rep Markey (MA) If passed it would require a small refundable deposit on beverage containers and could result in the recycling of 3 to 4 out of every 5 plastic bottles (glass bottles and aluminum cans too.) Currently we recycle fewer than 1 out of 5 plasic beverage bottles. This year Americans trash more than 75 billion plastic beverage bottles alone. What a waste! Thanks for covering this topic. Pat Franklin

By Stew Jenkins
From Santa Cruz & Watsonville, CA, 01/06/2009

Dear Sam,

Thanks for this timely story. Both the garbage and recycling industries remain virtually invisible to people and so most Americans don't know that on average every single person in the US generates 1,642 lbs of trash each year! (The US generates 1/3 of the worlds trash) I was wondering if I could use the photos in your slideshow about Ed Byrne's clamshell factory to show kids a successful recycling facility? (With credit to you and Marketplace of course) I teach and advise 36 different K-12th grade public and private schools helping kids, teachers, and staff to reduce the amount of garbage they produce and reminding them of the power of recycling. My website: www.wastefreeschools.org I look forward to speaking with you. -Stew

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