

Pot Stickler

 pacificsun.com/pot-stickler

Tom
Gogola

Jul 10,
2019

So-called 'doob tubes' are a menace to the environment.

When JJ Kaplan was a supervisor for the San Francisco-based cannabis collective SPARC, he saw a lot of trash headed for the garbage bin.

"I would see boxes of plastic and waste everywhere," Kaplan recalls. He talked about it with his friend Sam Penny, a garbage-truck driver who had also noticed the weed-waste problem, and together they decided to launch a new business, Canna Cycle, to reduce waste in the world of weed.

"People forget our industry was built on old-school hippies and growers who were sustainable on all aspects," Kaplan says.

Based in Eureka, Canna Cycle launched at the beginning of the year and now has recycling bins in more than a dozen locations throughout the Bay Area.

Locally, their 23-gallon bins at the five Bay Area SPARC locations collect cannabis packaging—glass jars, so-called plastic "doob tubes" and all the other childproofing plastic that's part of the California Bureau of Cannabis' Control's regulations.

How does it work? Pretty simple. The bins are open to the public and easily identifiable via the Canna Cycle logo. Kaplan says the biggest waste product they see are the "doob tubes," and glass jars.

But they don't—they can't—accept everything, especially discarded cartridges from vape pens. That's a recycling story for another day, or another legislative session.

Kaplan and Penny plan to repurpose much of the glass they collect back to the industry, and say that the plastic "doob tubes" can be turned into things like filament for 3-D printers. (A "doob tube" is cannabis-industry vernacular for a plastic tube which contains a marijuana cigarette.)

The company launched at a time when the recycling industry is in crisis due to rising costs and shrinking returns on investment, with some cities across the nation cutting their programs.

And, it comes at a time when Sacramento is starting to tune in to environmental consequences brought on by legalization—if slowly.

The state Senate recently passed SB 424, which was targeted mainly at banning single-use e-cigarettes but also includes single-use cannabis vape pens in its scope.

That bill was supported by the California Product Stewardship Council, a Sacramento-based non-profit that works with producers to limit their end-of-life waste-stream. Turns out there's a whole lot of it associated with the cannabis industry, and the CPSC says it's on the lookout for future legislation that dives into the thorny issues of environmental sustainability as met with child-proofing mandates. The advent of Proposition 64, she says, came with so many built-in ground rules and regulations that there "aren't too many legislative aspects to change the waste aspect right now."

Indeed, there are none this year, except for SB 424. But 424 would only be addressing the cannabis products that enter the market as a single-use cannabis vape pen. "It doesn't include single-use joints," Brasch notes, only the "single-use vape pens that can't be refilled or reused."

Enter Kaplan and his new program to collect those tubes containing single joints.

Even as awareness of its eco-impact grows, so to does the cannabis industry itself: 10 states and Washington D.C. have already fully legalized recreational use for adults, with another 27 allowing either medicinal use or use of the non-psychoactive CBD. Only 10 states remain with laws completely criminalizing the plant. And then there's Marin County, which, despite all of its legend as a sort of Patient Zero for pot, has been pretty conservative in the legalization rollout.

Kaplan's looking to expand his business to include recycling bins for delivery-only services but says that for the time being he's "written off Marin County until we see more infrastructure"—meaning, brick-and-mortar shops where he can park a few Canna Cycle bins.

"I love Marin, it's a beautiful place," he says. "It saddens me a little bit that the county is a little behind."

He says "we can definitely work with the delivery services," and offers that drivers could pick up cannabis packing from consumers and bring it back to a companies' headquarters.

Monica Gray, chief operating officer at the bustling Nice Guys Delivery service in San Rafael hopes Kaplan won't give up on Marin County and says she can't wait to contact him to see how his model might work for Marin County. "I think it would be great and our consumers would like that a lot."

For one, Gray sees delivery as the next-generation cannabis movement and that concerns over Marin's conservative posture when it comes to dispensaries (there's one in the county) are overstated. It's a great opportunity and she'd like to seize upon it.

"I really do believe that delivery is the new forefront in getting cannabis. Prior to recreational, when we were medical only, many of the medical patients we delivered to couldn't leave their homes. I don't really find Marin to be so behind on this—it would be great if we could have a dispensary—but setting that aside, it's the new forefront. Everything is delivered these days: groceries, laundry. The list goes on and on. Amazon, I think they have a recycling program where you can return the packaging," she says, referencing a new pilot program sponsored by the company now underway in Marin.

The time's ripe for recycling consumer waste on the delivery routes, she says. "If Amazon can do it, so can the cannabis industry." Her customers, too, have been griping about the excessive packaging wrought by legalization and says the Canna Cycle program would be a great fit for Marin.

"I think it's great. Sign me up. I've definitely had my ears open for something like that," she says, "because one of our challenges as a company is to be as sustainable and environmentally friendly as possible—and we get customers calling all the time complaining about the packaging. I love the idea and would get 100 percent the idea of our drivers picking up the packaging."

To a large measure this story is not just about cannabis but about that facet of American consumerism which equates individual liberty with the pursuit of personalized products. Meanwhile, safety regulations are forcing cannabis businesses to create a lot of waste via packaging that's designed to dissuade children from using cannabis products. The culture clash has conspired to create a pretty wasteful pot industry in the state.

More and more city and state governments are banning single-use plastic items, from grocery bags to straws, but California regulations require all cannabis products to be sold in child-resistant packaging—some of which has to be reusable for multiple doses—and all edible products must be in opaque packaging.

This includes everything from pre-rolled joints sold in "doob tubes" to plastic jars of cannabis flower. All of these are contributing to a larger problem of plastic particles contaminating the ocean, and even our bodies. A study released in June in Environmental Science and Technology found that humans eat 39,000 to 52,000 tiny plastics per year.

The sticking point in sustainable cannabis is vaping. An August 2018 report in the Annals of Internal Medicine found that one in seven Americans had used cannabis in the previous year, with nearly 5 percent of those using an electronic cigarette, or vape pen, to do so.

The devices come with heavily toxic lithium batteries and vape cartridges made out of metal and glass, plus combustible heating filaments. While each of these things are theoretically recyclable on their own, when combined they are not. There's also some leftover THC

residue inside the cartridge, making it a hazardous material by law, and leaving individual e-cigarettes in a sort of after-life limbo. At present, the disposal of e-cigs and cannabis vape pens is left to the consumer, and by extension, the locality that picks up the trash.

Kaplan's bins are clearly marked to let people know that they don't accept vape cartridges. "That's been a tough one," he says. "We've been instructed by the state to stay away from it. That's the one gray area in all of the packaging issues."

Canna Cycle recently teamed up with Humboldt County growers to launch a separate company, Sugar Hill, last month. Its first item, the Sugar Stick blunt, comes rolled in hemp wraps with a wooden, biodegradable tip to reduce heat on the user's lips, and comes in a fully biodegradable, hemp-plastic tube.

"The cost of using biodegradable plastic can be two to three times more expensive," says Kaplan. "But if these become popular, hopefully other brands will follow suit."

He says he got in the business—it's a de facto non-profit for the time being, he says with a laugh, to plug a gap in recycling efforts already underway by companies such as Galicia that focus on the producer-end. He's not making any money from the service, which is free to both the dispensary and the consumer. "Our revenue is coming from our consumer brand," he says, "and this is a cool thing we get to offer to dispensaries."

Kaplan and Gray both highlight what some may view as a built-in absurdity when it comes to well-intentioned childproofing that comes with cannabis. Gray notes that some of her customers already return the packaging to the drivers upon delivery of the product. The company has previously offered to take back child-resistant bags upon delivery of the product, "or the consumer would just take the item out of the bag and give it back to us and we'd just reuse it. To gather other items, that would just be fantastic."

Kaplan, who is a parent himself, appreciates the rationale behind childproof pot products but observes that "if you have cannabis, it shouldn't be anywhere near your child in the first place. I, as a parent, shouldn't have to worry about you and your kid." A person visiting a SPARC location can now make their purchase and dispose of the packaging before they get back to their car. There are typically no children present in the parking lot at SPARC.

Kaplan further envisions a future California pot culture where consumers would have a choice between "doob tubes" and so-called "loosies." It's kind of a when-cows-fly idea, but why not?

"The biggest change we could make is to give people the option," he says. "Do you want it in a 'doob tube,' or do you just want it in your hand? If I could go buy three pre-rolls like that, if I know that I'm saving the earth? That would be beautiful."

By Tom Gogola and Mat Weir

A version of this story ran in the July 3 Good Times in Santa Cruz, a Metro publication.