

Eco-tip for 1/20/19

Plastic Foam Drop-off Reopens for Transit Packaging Only

By David Goldstein, Ventura County IWMD, PWA

Plastic foam (e.g. Styrofoam) is ubiquitous, in food service containers and packaging. Because it is made by heating plastic resin with a gas, it is a product composed of bubbles. Over 90 percent of its volume is air, and the resulting volume-to-weight ratio provides both an environmental benefit and a risk.

On the plus side, because polystyrene uses so little material to create containers and packaging, its manufacture requires fewer resources and uses less energy than comparable packages, according to a study by Franklin Associates, a widely respected environmental research firm.

However, its volume-to-weight ratio also makes it too difficult to recycle in curbside or commercial programs in Ventura County. Worse, when it breaks apart and blows out of garbage cans, out of trucks, or off piles at solid waste facilities, it can become permanent litter.

According to the web site of the non-profit Heal the Bay, 110 municipalities in California have limited the use of polystyrene. The County of Ventura prohibits vendors at County parks, community centers, or recreation facilities from serving food or drinks in polystyrene. The city of Santa Monica's ban is the most recent and goes farther. Starting at the beginning of this month, any business serving food or drinks in that city must use either reusable or ocean-degradable containers, essentially banning polystyrene from restaurants citywide.

Conscientious consumers can easily avoid polystyrene food service containers, generally by making choices when ordering food, drinks, or to-go containers at restaurants. However, few can avoid another category of polystyrene. "Transport packaging" is used to contain, protect, or insulate products during shipment. If you order products on-line, you are likely to receive blocks of polystyrene, some of which may not fit easily into your refuse cart.

Just last month, Astrofoam Molding, at 4117 Calle Tesoro in Camarillo, reopened a polystyrene transport packaging recycling drop-off opportunity to the public after giving up for several months in 2018. They gave up last year, and may do so again, due to reckless recyclers. Because the value of dropped-off material is negligible – remember, it is over 90 percent air – Astrofoam cannot afford to have workers spend much time removing and disposing unacceptable material.

Astrofoam regrinds foam and mixes it with their virgin material to manufacture products such as coolers for perishables, wine shipment boxes, corner/edge protectors, and custom transit packaging. If they miss sorting out a piece of metal in a load of foam, they

risk damaging their equipment. If they miss sorting out a label or tape, they risk degrading the quality of their product.

Adding to their challenges, not all foam is the same, so not all can be accepted. Astrofoam does not accept food service polystyrene such as cups, meat trays, egg cartons, nor take-out food containers; food service polystyrene is vacuum formed or dry molded, making it too thin to recycle in Astrofoam's equipment. Astrofoam's regrinder also cannot recycle high density foam or foam over 2 inches in thickness.

Astrofoam owner Steve Bevan asks recyclers to come only during open hours; check in and drop off only inside the building; contain your loads in a clean bag; and call first. Call Astrofoam at 805/482-7276.

Volume-to-weight ratios do not justify long trips to the drop-off. Consuming fuel and creating air pollution by transporting light recyclables can negate the environmental value of recycling.