

## **Mail-in Recycling Program Turns Cigarettes into Bench**

By David Goldstein, VCPWA, IWMD

An on-line “unveiling” last month of a Ventura beach bench made from recycled cigarette butts quickly generated over 153 social media shares and dozens of comments on the Ventura Parks and Recreation Division Facebook page, as web surfers took the obvious opportunity to crack punny jokes. Most jokes are along the line of the official name given to the cigarette butt collection and recycling program organized by the non-profit Surfrider Foundation, “Hold On To Your Butt.”

The city and the non-profit have purchased and installed 103 metal containers in areas where cigarette butt litter was common, despite a city ordinance banning smoking in public areas. Volunteers empty approximately 4,000 butts per month from these receptacles; combined with the butts they collect from beach cleanup events, they have collected over 270,000 butts in a little over two years, according to Juli Marciel, Surfrider’s coordinator for the program.

Volunteers put these collected butts into boxes with postage paid labels supplied by Terracycle, a company recycling a wide variety of products. Recycling by mail is too expensive to be viable for nearly any material, but in the case of cigarettes, the program is made possible through sponsorship by a product manufacturer. In fact, the sponsorship funds are sufficient not just to pay for the free mailers, but also to donate one dollar per pound of collected cigarettes to Keep America Beautiful, a non-profit focused on litter prevention and clean-up. Surfrider also obtains sponsorships noted on these containers, helping fund the cost of the containers.

Some who comment on the sponsored recycling program see corporate responsibility, and others see “green washing” focused on improving perceptions of a product through the misleading appearance of eco-friendliness. Lars Davenport, Environmental Specialist with the city of Ventura, points out a major benefit of the containers and the bench. “Cigarette butts tend to be disposed wherever a cigarette is finished,” he said, noting the crucial role of convenience in preventing litter, “and some people seem to think their cigarette litter is not significant” because some of it is biodegradable. A bench made from butts drives home a message about the ubiquity of butts and their plastic content.

Indeed, Brian Hanck, a spokesperson for Terracycle, noted in an email, “We can put about 20%... cellulose acetate (plastic from cigarette butts)... into a bench, and the benches are about 80 pounds, so we would estimate that 15,000 cigarette butts go into one park bench.”

Cigarette butts are the most common form of litter, according to the Keep America Beautiful web site, which notes “putting them (cigarette butts) in planters and disposing of them in waterways is (also) litter;” butts often wash out and end up on shores.

Terracycle also provides sponsor-subsidized mail-in recycling programs for other products, ranging from Burt's Bees "lip care products" to Solo cups. Additionally, Terracycle has many non-sponsored programs, some of which seem designed to attract sponsors. For example, for \$102, you can purchase a small shipping box (11"x11"x20") and a postage paid return shipping label to send Terracycle your used chewing gum. According to Brian Hanck, the Terracycle spokesman, "Chewing gum is made from polymers which are synthetic plastics that do not biodegrade. The ...gum is sanitized and blended, then converted into plastic pellets. These specific plastic pellets are usually used in creating new products made of rubber or plastic..."

Among other items, the company also has mail-in recycling programs for coffee capsules, pens, plastic gloves, detergent booster pouches, ready-made pasta bags, contact lenses and the blister packs containing the lenses. Terracycle previously had sponsor funding for a program to recycle mixed plastics from beach clean-ups, but their web site indicates the program is no longer "accepting new partners" for that program.

*On the net:*

<https://www.terracycle.com/en-US/>