

It's Time to Rethink Recycling

Dennis Levinson, County Executive

February 1, 2019

A recent Press editorial applauded several South Jersey towns and retailers for implementing bans and fees on single-use plastic bags. It noted this effort to reduce plastic pollution in our environment, particularly in our rivers, lakes, streams and oceans, started in New Jersey along our very own Atlantic County shoreline.

The actions of these towns and retailers help raise awareness of an undeniable plastic waste crisis. Research suggests that our oceans will contain more plastic by weight than fish by the year 2050. Studies have found tiny particles of plastic are already in our food supply. An average person who consumes seafood ingests 11,000 tiny pieces of plastic per year. And the world's largest collection of floating plastic trash, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch located between California and Hawaii, is now twice the size of Texas!

We have become a throw-away society, favoring convenience over responsibility. We like our disposable food and beverage containers, prefer bottled water over tap, and plastic bags to paper. According to Clean Water Action, packaging waste (primarily plastics) now accounts for 30 percent of American household trash.

The steady growth of single-use plastics has increased the number of plastics in our recycling stream. Unfortunately, the recycling market is now shrinking. In 2018, China instituted a strict contamination ban and began refusing material it had once accepted for purchase as being too impure for recycling. As a result of China's crackdown, the Atlantic County Utilities Authority recently advised its customers that it will now only accept plastics #1-2 with necks smaller than their base.

Our mixed paper recyclables containing newspapers, magazines and junk mail, are also no longer of interest to China. States that previously were paid \$100 per ton for newsprint now only receive an average of \$5 per ton.

For years we have been encouraged to comingle our recyclables in a single-stream. What could be easier for the consumer? But this convenience has made it more difficult and expensive to clean and sort these items that may then be rejected by buyers as being contaminated. New technologies are needed to improve sorting and reuse and consumers need to be reeducated about changes in the recycling industry.

Several European countries as well as Australia are considering a circular economy in which everything that is used is recycled within that country. A circular economy appears to value responsibility over convenience. If you use something, you have to be responsible for its reuse. Manufacturers would be required to design products with their reuse in mind, essentially planning for their entire life cycle.

Some also contend that corporate producers should lead the effort to move consumers away from single-use plastics. They should be encouraged, perhaps with incentives, to act as stewards of our environment and to buy and use recycled products. Corporate America could, and should, set the example for consumer America.

Consider these staggering statistics. Plastics can take as long as 600 years to degrade in the ocean and as long as 1,000 years to decompose in landfills. During the last 60 years, 8.3 billion tons of plastic have been produced worldwide, but only 9% has been recycled. The numbers are clearly not in our favor.

For all our good intentions, our efforts to ban single-use bags, promote reusable grocery bags, recycle at home and work, are only a drop in the bucket and will never be enough to solve this crisis. This is not to say they should be discouraged or abandoned; to the contrary, they should continue to be recognized and promoted and serve as springboards to greater action.

It is time we accept our contribution to the plastic waste crisis. It is time we value responsibility over convenience. South Jersey was successful in pioneering New Jersey's transition from single-use bags, so who is to say we can't lead New Jersey in rethinking recycling? Certainly not me!