

5 Things You Can Do Now to Make a Greener Year 2000

The holidays are the busiest time of the year for recycling companies, yet the last thing on most people's minds right now is recycling. The repercussions? We can end up doubling or even tripling our waste stream this month, working against ourselves and our long-range plans for our state.

Washington has set a goal to cut the waste stream by 50% in the year 2000. Last year Washingtonians recycled 36% of all our waste. But how do we make the jump from 36% to 50%? Simple --by becoming more conscientious about the items we buy and knowing our recycling options. And by remaining conscientious throughout the entire year.

As the season of conspicuous consumption is upon us, remember these 5 easy ways to be an advocate for the environment and an active contributor to Washington's Year 2000 goal:

① Sort your waste according to your recycling program's guidelines. Wrapping paper -- except foil paper-- is recyclable. However, in the frenzy of unwrapping gifts, people often fail to sort the ribbon and other wrappings such as styrofoam and plastics from the paper, crumpling it all together and tossing it into the recycle bin. The recycling plant has a finite set of hands available to sort the goods that come in --yes, it is done manually. If enough of the batch contains these contaminants (that is, anything other than what is supposed to be in the batch) the whole load is thrown out.

Tim Crosby is operations manager of Recycle America, one of the nation's largest recycling companies. He's had to throw out whole batches of mixed paper around the holidays simply because it was not economically feasible for his workers to sort through all the contaminants to get a clean load of paper. "It's too bad," he says, "but recycling companies are privately held, and just like any other business, they have to show a profit in order to continue."

② Learn what items are acceptable recyclables for your area. Almost everything made is now recyclable somewhere in the world. "But, in order to stay in business," Crosby points out, "recycling companies must limit themselves to items they can gather in quantity and for which

they have a manufacturer who needs the items as ingredients for their products." In short, they deal only in the most profitable area of recyclables.

What does this mean to you, the consumer? It means a lot of products you may think are recyclable aren't. Examples include plastic yogurt and margarine containers marked with a number 2 on the bottom, plastic cups and aerosol cans. Don't try to slip an item in that doesn't belong or one that you are unsure about. Although you may feel like you are doing something good, you aren't. Not only is that item unlikely to be recycled, moreover you are slowing down the process for the ones that can be recycled and perhaps even ruining a large batch of items in the process.

It's our responsibility to know what goods our local recycling company accepts. Ignorance can cause additional waste, working antithetically to your good intentions, so if you are unsure of your program's guidelines, call Recycle America or the Department of Ecology.

③ Avoid styrofoam. Styrofoam may be recyclable somewhere in the world, but not in Snohomish or King Counties, so look for alternatives. Using cardboard egg cartons instead of styrofoam cartons is a perfect example. Those cardboard egg cartons that have no broken egg product in them can be recycled versus their styrofoam counterpart. Health laws prohibit grocery stores from accepting used cartons for reuse; however, some stores offer eggs in bulk for hand selection. In this case, you can easily reuse an existing container many times by bringing it with you to the store, not only saving the environment from weekly styrofoam additions to the landfill, but cutting out completely any additional handling, recycling or production.

Another styrofoam sidestep when dining out is to ask that your leftovers be wrapped in aluminum foil instead of the ubiquitous styrofoam box. You should clean aluminum foil of any food products before recycling it, but Crosby says that even soiled aluminum foil has a good chance of making it through recycling versus styrofoam's zero chance.

④ Be aware of packaging when purchasing products. First, always choose the product with the least amount of packaging because, naturally, there will be less to dispose of. Also, examine the packaging. Look on the bottom of plastic products for a number 1 or 2. Unfortunately, even with this coding, not all plastics are recyclable. Plastic recycling is the most confusing, so make sure

you check with your local recycling company to be clear on the specifics of what they will accept. For example, one recycler will not accept yogurt or margarine tubs, but will accept any jar-type plastics with screw lids that are numbered 1 or 2.

Since there is no market for number 3-7 plastics, these are definitely out. Just put those products back on the shelf and move on. When shopping, make your product choices based on this knowledge and, if you cannot find items in the number 1 and 2 categories, tell the manager of your requirements.

And don't be afraid to call manufacturers and tell them what you want. Companies exist to sell their products. If enough people call and say they are not purchasing a company's product because they don't like the non-recyclable packaging, the company will change its packaging. Most companies list their 800 number on their packages, so take advantage of this and offer your opinion freely --and often.

⑤ Plan ahead before going to the grocery store. Don't use new bags for every trip. Bring your own grocery bag, preferably cloth which can be washed and reused indefinitely. Paper bags from the grocery store can also be brought back to be used again. As an incentive, most grocery stores offer a small reimbursement to customers who bring their own bags.

Also remember to reuse the plastic bags you get in the produce section of the grocery store. If they are clean but cannot be used for some reason such as being torn, take them back to the grocery store for recycling. There are collection bins for your plastic bags located near store entrances. Grocery stores are the only ones who recycle plastic bags; curbside recycling does not accept them. Coffee bags can be used many times if you make it a habit to bring them back with you to the store. This isn't that hard; just keep a place in your car to stash your grocery store reusables so you are always ready, even when making a quick run to the store.

You'll find many more ideas are available online on the Environmental Protection Agency's website at www.epa.gov. If you have questions about recycling in Snohomish or King County, call Recycle America at 425-481-1100. The Department of Ecology also offers a recycling hotline at 1-800-732-9253. In short, there are many resources to help you be more environmentally aware. Take advantage of them and make a New Year's resolution now for the Year 2000 to make a bagful of garbage *per year* instead of per week. ✨