

# Recycling Online



## “When waste reduction is out to lunch”

by Roger Guttentag

Perhaps you may have noticed within the past month a growing number of happy adults and sad-looking kids. It's clear from this evidence that a new school year has indeed begun. And this, of course, entails a number of changes to our daily routines which often includes the preparation of one, or multiple, school lunches for nourishing our young scholars. This has not gone unnoticed by our food industries which have introduced hundreds of lunch-time products to appeal to hungry kids and harried parents. Typically, these products are designed to rely on single-use materials that require disposal after the food is consumed. In an attempt to reduce waste disposal costs, as well as promote environmentally-preferable alternatives, there is a growing inter-

est by parents, municipalities and school districts for advocating ways to pack lunches that generate significantly less, or even no waste at all.

## Waste-free lunch basics

Packing a waste-free lunch (WFL) is not rocket science or even hard food science. It, essentially, requires replacing disposable single-use products with those that are recyclable, or even better, reusable. Simple overviews on how this can be done can be found on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Vermont Agency of Natural Resources websites. A more comprehen-

sive resource on WFL is provided by Waste Free Lunches, a site maintained by Obentec, Inc., a manufacturer of WFL products. In addition to presenting the same type of general information on WFLs, you can also find summaries of successful programs for encouraging WFLs, as well as a detailed case study example, in addition to links to other information resources and useful downloads such as PowerPoint slide presentations. Finally, the Waste Free Lunch Challenge, a project of the Recycling Council of Ontario and other organizations, will have additional resources aimed at helping parents including instructional videos.

## Some options to consider

The workable solutions you need to make WFL feasible are based on substituting single-use disposable products with their recyclable or reusable equivalents. The essential components of the WFL, aside from the food itself, are the lunch carrier, food and beverage containers, eating utensils and napkins. There are a number of websites that have these products available for review and purchase. I have listed seven of them at the end of this column in the Web Address Directory. It is by no means a comprehensive survey of what can be found on the Web, but these sites do help to illustrate a number of the most popular WFL product options. One example is the bento-style lunch boxes that have multiple compartments to allow different lunch items to be kept segregated within the same container. Another interesting product category is reusable bags that are designed to have the same

## Web Address Directory

Cabrillo National Monument – Zero Waste Lunches	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/CabrilloZW">http://tinyurl.com/CabrilloZW</a>
Go Green Lunch Box	<a href="http://gogreenlunchbox.com">http://gogreenlunchbox.com</a>
How to Make Reusable Sandwich Bags	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/FrugalLunch">http://tinyurl.com/FrugalLunch</a>
Kids Konserve	<a href="http://kidskonserve.com">http://kidskonserve.com</a>
LapTop Lunches	<a href="http://www.laptoplunches.com">http://www.laptoplunches.com</a>
PB Green Bags	<a href="http://www.pbgreenbags.com">http://www.pbgreenbags.com</a>
Reuseit	<a href="http://www.reuseit.com">http://www.reuseit.com</a>
ReUsies	<a href="http://reusies.com">http://reusies.com</a>
Snack Taxi	<a href="http://www.snacktaxi.com">http://www.snacktaxi.com</a>
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency – Pack a Waste Free Lunch	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/EPALunchEd">http://tinyurl.com/EPALunchEd</a>
Vermont Agency of Natural Resources – Waste Free Lunch	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/VTLunch">http://tinyurl.com/VTLunch</a>
Waste Free Lunch Challenge	<a href="http://www.wastefreelunch.com">http://www.wastefreelunch.com</a>
Waste Free Lunches	<a href="http://www.wastefreelunches.org">http://www.wastefreelunches.org</a>

functions as the more well-known single-use plastic snack and sandwich bags. Some of the other WFL products, such as reusable eating utensils, drink containers and napkins, can certainly be found in your local big box retailers. However, these sites also try to present a more appealing selection through better designs, additional features or the use of environmentally-preferable materials. One interesting alternative, for example include reusable-type of eating utensils that are made from bamboo that, according to the sites selling them, have been grown and harvested in an environmentally-sustainable manner. Finally, if you are a do-it-yourself type (or just plain cheap) there are sites that will show you how to make your own WFL tools. The Living A Frugal Life site has, for instance, a tutorial on how to make your own reusable snack and sandwich bags.

## Making lunch a teaching moment

The interest by parents and schools in promoting WFLs also, not coincidentally, sparks the creation of teaching materials that use the WFL concept as a way to teach about environmental as well as standard curriculum topics. For example, the Cabrillo (California) National Monument, has a downloadable lesson plan that uses WFL as a way to teach math and science related concepts.

Additional teaching materials can also be found on the Free Lunch Challenge site which is part of a weeklong event (October 17-21, 2011) being held in Canada. Individual classrooms and entire schools are being encouraged to register with the challenge and participate by tracking the amount of lunch waste being created prior to joining the challenge, as well as during it. A large variety of downloadable or online support materials are made available including a very well designed Excel spreadsheet to be used for tracking the results of lunch audits and a really handy reference sheet on the weights of typical lunch materials or products.

## Final thoughts

The WFL is one of many ways small consistent actions by many individuals can add up to very large beneficial consequences. There is no question that switching to a WFL style is really not that hard from a technical perspective. The real obstacles are twofold.

First, there is the time problem. Preparing WFLs does take a little more time since the products being used need to be cleaned for repeated use. The amount of time may not be huge in reality but it may be perceived by parents as being more than they can spare. This is an issue that frankly is not really addressed head-on by the listed WFL resources and it should be.

Second, it requires parents to be more involved in lunch preparation than just dropping in processed food items. This issue does get more recognition with many

suggestions on how to create lunches that will be appealing as well as healthy. However, many of these food suggestions rely on using fresh produce items that are not always available or affordable for many parents. This is, unfortunately, an issue beyond the scope of this column but it should not be ignored either.

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