

► In My Opinion

THE BIG APPLE MADE A BIG BLUNDER ON EPS

New York City leaders said infrastructure and markets are lacking for curbside foam.

Here's why they're wrong.

BY PATTY MOORE



New York City had the opportunity to be a leader in recycling. Instead? Feel-good politics once again trumped thoughtful public policy and will result in less recycling and higher costs for businesses.

In 2013, the New York City Council passed Local Law No. 142, which required the commissioner of the New York City Department of Sanitation (DSNY) to determine whether or not food service expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam containers could be recycled in an economically feasible and environmentally effective manner that is safe for employees.

On Jan. 8 of this year, in the wake of the DSNY research process, Mayor Bill de Blasio's administration announced the City would ban polystyrene because "expanded polystyrene foam cannot be recycled," an assertion that is patently false. Millions of pounds of post-consumer EPS are recycled every week. All types of EPS are collected for recycling via hundreds of curbside, drop-off and special collection programs throughout the U.S. and Canada. These materials are being recycled in various ways, and all the material is returned to commerce, displacing virgin material.

The City also asserted that "there currently is no market for post-consumer EPS collected in a curbside metal, glass and plastic recycling program." This too is undeniably false. There are over 60 commingled curbside collection programs here in California, where my business is based, that are successfully selling this type of mate-

rial. I personally receive requests for recycled EPS on a nearly daily basis. Recycled EPS is made into DVD cases, picture frames, toys, glue, surfboard blanks and office supplies such as pens, stapler bodies and rulers. It is also utilized to manufacture wood-alternative products such as interior decorative moldings and construction materials such as concrete forms.

In fact, the potential end-uses for recycled EPS – like most recycled plastic materials – are primarily limited by the lack of available supply.

What is most disappointing is that New York City had a chance to recycle not only the food service foam, but all the EPS generated by residents – even that which was not part of the proposed ban. Materials in this uncovered category include egg cartons, protective packing, ice chests and meat trays. Most importantly, the City also could have recycled all of the rigid PS that is currently being collected for recycling and – according to a National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) report – disposed as residue. The de Blasio administration could have fulfilled the intimated promise to residents of the city to actually recycle what they ask residents to put in the bin – items such as baby wipe boxes, cold drink cups, clamshells and coat hangers.

New York City could have, with very minimal risk, taken up an offer from Dart Container to pay 100 percent of the costs for incorporating foam recycling into the two MRFs that handle materials

from the municipality as part of the existing recycling collection and processing system. [Full disclosure: Patty Moore is a plastics recycling consultant who has worked with numerous plastics companies, Dart Container Corp. among them]. Decision-makers also could have accepted Dart's guarantee that Plastic Recycling, Inc. (PRI) would purchase the material long term. Dart has been recovering EPS since 1990, and it annually recovers over 1.5 million pounds of post-consumer EPS for recycling. Even the NRDC report admits that "PRI is certainly a reputable reclaimer for post-industrial and commercial recycled PS."

The global demand for all PS is steadily increasing. According to GBI Research, the global demand for both polystyrene and EPS increased to 14.9 million tons in 2010 from 13 million tons in 2000. This is expected to further swell to 23.5 million tons by 2020. Yet, the de Blasio administration chose to ignore the statistics and the

opportunity to reduce waste.

Given Dart's offer to pay for infrastructure and New York's concession that "the recycling of EPS would not add additional recycling or refuse collection truck mileage due to the relatively low weight of EPS in the system, and the current excess capacity per truck shift," foam recycling is certainly economically feasible in New York City. And given all of the additional foam which won't be banned – along with all the rigid polystyrene which is already being accepted and wrongly landfilled – EPS recycling is not only environmentally effective, it is environmentally advantageous.

Finally, regarding the "safe for employees" criterion: The DSNY found recycling the material "would not create additional hazards for Sanitation Workers" and that it is "safe for its employees" at the MRF.

The de Blasio administration's decision ensures that the polystyrene that is not banned will continue to be landfilled. At a

cost to taxpayers, New York City has taken a step back in recycling.

The city that never sleeps could have been a leader and chosen to reduce waste and recover more materials. Unfortunately, Mayor de Blasio chose the wasteful path, and is shamefully saying he did so in the name of the environment. **PRU**

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