

Industry takes on pollution problem

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Amid a rising chorus of concern in California about litter and pollution from plastic packaging, several industry groups are taking steps to combat the problem.

The California Film Extruders and Converters Association has developed an environmental audit it is marketing as a green seal of approval, and a separate group, Progressive Bag Alliance, has started printing bags with anti-litter messages and is talking with Los Angeles officials about funding a citywide public education campaign.

For Pete Grande, president of Command Packaging in Vernon and head of the CFECA audit program, it's about industry reducing the negative impact of its manufacturing processes, and maintaining a dialogue with government officials on an important issue.

“For the longest time, the plastics industry has been viewed as uncooperative,” he said during a Sept. 8 interview at his office. “We can do a better job as an industry with respect to environmental issues, and we will.”

Industry groups are responding to intense pressure in the state. Cities are debating bans and taxes, the Los Angeles area is under an expensive court order to reduce litter in waterways and one state agency is targeting the plastic film industry to boost the 5 percent recycling rate for bags and film.

Under the CFECA program, which rolled out last month, a third-party auditor looks at companies' environmental performance and rates firms on things like use of recycled content, controlling air pollution and limiting the stray resin pellets that get into storm-water systems.

While designed by industry, the program is not “window dressing,” Grande contends: Stringent audits will be conducted by a firm run by Joe Greene, a professor at California State University-Chico, and companies will pay \$5,000 for the review for one plant, with \$2,500 for additional factories.

He said the program measures the amount of stray resin pellets per square yard on company property, and whether a facility can certify that its products are free of heavy metals.

The program is not limited to companies in California.

Grande said it is extremely difficult to get the highest rating without using recycled content. That has prompted Command Packaging to set a 2006 company goal of developing a line of plastic bags with recycled content.

CFECA officials said it's unclear how customers such as retailers and restaurants will look at CFECA's Environmentally Preferred Rating system, but said they hope firms that are sensitive about their public images will find it attractive.

Robert Bateman, president of RoPlast Industries Inc. in Oroville, Calif., and a proponent of the EPR program, said the rating system could offer companies like Nike and the Gap “some assurance that the products they buy are made in environmentally responsible plants.”

Bateman said efforts like his group's do deflect some regulatory pressure on industry, and he said he does not think it's inevitable that California will take a strong government role in reducing plastic litter, if industry takes action and retailers change how they dispense bags.

He also said the environmental standard could offer protection from foreign imports, particularly from the Far East, during a time when there's very little investment in the economically hard-hit plastic bag industry in the United States.

“There is no question that Asian firms are not as environmentally friendly with air quality and the heavy-metals issue,” Bateman said. “While is not exclusively North American, it will not be easy for Asian firms to sign up.”

Beyond starting new programs, industry officials have put renewed energy into older efforts, like Operation Clean Sweep, a joint effort of the Society of the Plastics Industry Inc. and the American Plastics Council.

OCS started in the late 1980s as a way to control pellet spills and waste at factories, and to keep pellets from getting into local water systems, but the program faded in importance, said Steve Jones, an executive at injection molder Jatco Inc. in Union City, Calif., speaking on behalf of Washington-based SPI.

But after seeing presentations last year from the Algalita Marine Research Foundation, a Long Beach, Calif., group active in plastic litter issues, industry officials saw that they did have a problem and moved to restart the OCS effort, he said.

The Algalita foundation and industry have worked on a best-management-practices program for OCS and found a range of industry reactions, from strong interest to indifference.

Charles Moore, head of the foundation, said some factories saw dramatic reductions in pellet loss - in one case from 28 million pellets on the ground to 9 million after implementing best management practices.

Others, however, did not take the information seriously and did not make improvements.

“The small guys are the hard guys to work with,” he said.

Industry officials also are working with the city of Los Angeles, which last year formed a task force to look at plastic bag litter in its waterways.

Progressive Bag Alliance, made up of five companies that say they supply 95 percent of the plastic bags for grocers and retailers in the state, developed recommendations with city officials to do things like river cleanups and help pay for a public education campaign.

The firms also have worked with retailers on how to use fewer plastic bags and, boosted by rising prices for recycled material, some have worked with local city governments to start plastic bag recycling programs, said Laurie Hansen, a Sacramento government affairs consultant and PBA representative.

Hansen told the conference that PBA companies - Advanced Polybag Inc., Hilex Poly Co. LLC, Intoplast Group Ltd., Superbag Corp. and Vanguard Plastics Inc. - are serious about reducing litter and waste, and are OK with selling fewer plastic bags, as long as their products aren't banned by governments.

“They'd rather have fewer bags used and still be able to sell them,” Hansen said.

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