

Plastic recycling rate falls below Oregon's goal for first time in 13 years

by Bend Weekly News Sources

Oregon's Rigid Plastic Container Recycling Rate Drops Below State-Mandated 25 Percent Rate; decline partly due to increase in plastic water and juice bottle sales and decrease in soft drink sales

The recycling rate for rigid plastic containers in Oregon dropped in 2005 to 24.3 percent, and the recycling rate projected for these containers in 2007 will remain below 25 percent, according to a report issued recently by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ).

This is the first time that DEQ has announced that the recycling rate has fallen below 25 percent since the state first began calculating the rigid plastic container recycling rate in 1993. This decline will trigger recycling-related requirements on some companies that package their products in plastic bottles and containers, unless the recycling rate increases back over 25 percent by 2008.

As part of the 1991 Oregon Recycling Act, the Oregon Legislature passed a law setting a 25 percent recycling rate mandate on these containers to help jump-start the recycling of plastics. The law encourages container manufacturers to recycle the plastic used to produce the containers. Passage of the law helped lead to the establishment of many plastic bottle collection programs throughout Oregon. According to the law, any rigid plastic container sold in Oregon must meet at least one of the following three criteria:

Â§ Contain at least 25 percent recycled content

Â§ Be made of plastic that is recycled in Oregon at a rate of at least 25 percent

Â§ Be reusable (refillable for at least five times)

Certain containers, including medicine containers and food containers other than beverage bottles, are exempt from the above requirements.

Until 2007, all packagers have been in compliance with the law because the overall recycling rate for plastic containers has exceeded 25 percent. Following DEQ's announcement of the drop in the recycling rate, some packagers may need to take steps such as using recycled plastic in their containers or changing to use a type of plastic which has a higher recycling rate if the overall recycling rate remains below 25 percent through 2008. By law, packagers have a one-year grace period in which to prepare to meet the state plastic container requirements, so the earliest that DEQ can enforce the recycling requirements will be 2008.

The decline in the rigid plastic container recycling rate can be attributed to two main factors, according to Peter Spendelow, DEQ solid waste specialist.

First, the sale of water and juice in plastic bottles is increasing while soft drink sales are declining. Soft drink bottles have high recycling rates under the Oregon Bottle Bill, while no-deposit water and juice bottles have much lower recycling rates.

Second, increasing amounts of plastic are being used to make tubs, trays and other types of non-bottle containers. Most curbside recycling collection programs collect only plastic bottles, so the tubs, trays and clamshells often are not recycled.

On the other hand, Spendelow sees four possibilities for increasing plastic recycling:

Â§ Many local governments and recycling collectors are considering adding tubs and other plastic containers to their curbside programs, and also providing customers with large roll-carts for storing and recycling all of their materials.

Â§ Recycled plastic prices are high due to the high cost of petroleum, leading businesses to increasingly separate out large plastic items including pails and crates for recycling.

Â§ There is industry interest in improving the effectiveness of the facilities that sort commingled recyclables, resulting in less plastic being mis-sorted and disposed.

Â§ Legislative proposals to add water and other beverages to the Oregon Bottle Bill could push Oregon's plastic recycling rate up to close to 30 percent, according to DEQ's projections.

DEQ compiles the rigid plastic container rates through information provided by recycling and waste disposal facilities in Oregon. Information is also gleaned from DEQ's annual material recovery survey, waste composition data and disposal data from Oregon landfills, incinerators and waste exporters. It takes about a year to compile all the information for each recently-ended calendar year.

DEQ's Rigid Plastic Container Recycling Rate Report is available on DEQ's Web site at <http://www.deq.state.or.us/lq/pubs/docs/sw/Rpc2005-07Report.pdf>. Other information on recycling issues is available from DEQ at: <http://www.deq.state.or.us/lq/sw/recovery/rpc.htm>. Questions about rigid plastic container recycling may be directed to Peter Spendelow, DEQ solid waste specialist, Portland, at (503) 229-5253 or toll-free in Oregon at 1-800-452-4011, ext. 5253.

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