

Eco-tip for 9-10-17

“Styrofoam” a High-Profile Issue at Coastal Cleanup; Steps to Manage on a Daily Basis

By David Goldstein, Ventura County IWMD, PWA

This Saturday, at some sites participating in California Coastal Cleanup Day, a non-profit group will work with volunteers to separate one particular type of litter. The 5 Gyres Institute plans to separately count, and then mail to California legislators, collected pieces of polystyrene (often known by the trade name “Styrofoam”). The institute, known for leading the successful federal campaign to ban microbeads in 2015, cites studies predicting there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by 2050, a problem “which no amount of clean up events can solve.”

Posters promoting the clean-up this year use the theme “Get rid of trash, not wildlife,” and they show pictures of wild animals in scenic areas. Some of the animal pictures are in reverse silhouette, making it look like their images were cut out of the picture. For example, a picture of a condor flying over a rocky coastline also includes a cutout in the shape of a second condor, along with text at the bottom of the picture, “Condors feed their chicks small pieces of trash, which can kill them.”

Indeed, polystyrene litter is problematic, but there are steps you can take to minimize risks. Do not throw away polystyrene cups or “to-go” containers in open-top trash cans, especially in coastal areas where seagulls tend to scavenge by pulling out and pecking trash. Even at home, take precautions when disposing of polystyrene; bag it with trash, and tie the top of the bag. Loose polystyrene can blow out of trash cans or off of garbage trucks, and pieces can be carried through storm drains down to the ocean.

Of course, the environmentally best alternative to a polystyrene cup is a reusable mug, but the most common alternative for single-use applications is a plasticized (“waxed”) paper cup. Partially because of this coating, these cups are also problematic litter and are also difficult to recycle.

Neither Styrofoam nor plasticized paper is recycled in local curbside programs because they are voluminous and have no value. Paying sorters to pluck these items from mixed recyclables is too expensive, and transporting them in trucks can waste more resources than can be saved by recycling.

No one locally recycles plasticized paper, and foam recycling is possible only for packaging, not for foam with food residue. Astrofoam, in Camarillo, is the one location in the county where foam blocks (such as the corners inside a box containing a television, the packaging inside a refrigerator, or the box enclosing shipments of prepared food for weight loss programs) are accepted for recycling.

On a typical day, three vehicles use the Astrofoam drop off site, which is open weekdays 9 am to 1 pm. The company limits drop off to only polystyrene uncontaminated with any food residual, tape, writing, or wrapping so they can crush it to pieces less than one quarter inch, mix it with virgin resin, and use it to manufacture the interiors of ice chests and packaging for the shipment of wine bottles. The company also makes foam for medical and food shipment purposes, but those products are made from purely virgin material. When Astrofoam receives more than they can handle, they bring the surplus to Foam Fabrication in L.A., where it is crushed into blocks for export.

Because it is mostly air, foam recycling makes environmental sense only if you are driving near a drop off location for other reasons. Astrofoam does not accept foam “peanuts” and other packing material, but these can be brought to mail-related stores, such as some UPS or Mailboxes Etcetera stores, for reuse.

You can find out more about Coastal Clean-up Day, including the locations of Ventura County sites, at <http://www.vccoastcleanup.org/cleanup-sites/>