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# OSPIRG protests manufacturer's recycling claim

By Meg Dedolph  
 Oregon Daily Emerald

OSPIRG is beginning a "Ban the Burn" campaign to discourage plastics manufacturers from shipping recyclable plastics to a plant in Washington where OSPIRG says the plastic will be burned.

Arthur Ericsson, the Eugene summer campaign director, said recyclable plastics from Oregon may end up at the Conrad tire pyrolysis plant in Chehalis, Wash., for burning.

"It's a larger movement coming from the national plastics industry," said Ericsson. "The plastics industry is hopeful this will take place nationwide."

He said the plastics industry supports burning because it keeps the market for new plastic intact.

"If it's being burned, you need to make new plastic to replace that," Ericsson said.

Lauri Aunan, an environmental advocate for OSPIRG, said the plastics industry has always

secretly supported incineration, while publicly supporting recycling.

However, Mark Meszaros of the American Plastics Council and manager of the Chehalis program, said burning and incineration are inaccurate terms to describe the process.

Meszaros said pyrolysis differs from actual burning or incineration because during pyrolysis, the plastic is passed through a long tube and heated until it becomes a gas.

Some of this gas is condensed to a petroleum-based oil, some remains in gaseous form and some becomes carbon black, a solid.

Meszaros said the gas will be used to fuel the plant, meaning the plant will be self-sufficient, and there are markets for the liquid and solid by-products.

But OSPIRG objects to the plastic industry trying to classify pyrolysis as recycling when they say the by-products, including the oil and gas, will probably be burned.

"We will not accept pyrolysis as recycling," Ericsson said.

Burning plastic is not the same as recycling plastic because new plastic containers are not being made from the old containers, Aunan said.

Meszaros believes that the pyrolysis process qualifies as recycling because the plastic is being broken down into raw materials that can be used to make more plastic or other products.

He said Conrad Industries plans to ship the liquid byproduct to plants where it can be made into more plastic.

Despite these plans, OSPIRG will not accept pyrolysis as recycling until Conrad Industries proves new plastic is being made from the liquid.

"I've told them, 'If you can show me that barrel of oil is shipped somewhere and made into something plastic, then that's recycling,'" Aunan said.

But Meszaros is adamant that pyrolysis constitutes a form of recycling.

"This is recycling in the truest sense of the word," he said. "We're diverting material from the landfill, we're converting it to raw materials, and we're turning it into a re-usable product."

"There's no way we can stand up and say '33.3 percent of this oil is going to become new plastic,' because we can't track individual molecules," Meszaros said.

Nancy Glines of Goodwill Industries, which handles most of the plastic recycling in Eugene, believes the definition of recycling needs to be expanded to include processes like pyrolysis.

"Maybe we need to look at plastics in a different light," she said. "I think we're hung up on semantics and what the original movement started out to be. Reduce, reuse and recycle, and if it fits one of those three categories, it's good. We need to stop squabbling over semantics."

Furthermore, Meszaros said the pyrolysis process would allow all seven grades of plastic to be re-used in some form.

Currently, Sanipac, a garbage collection service in Eugene only accepts No. 1, No. 2 and No. 5 plastic, three of the seven grades considered recyclable.

Most of the plastic collected — about 90 percent — is No. 1 and No. 2 plastic, according to Goodwill Industries, which handles Sanipac's plastic recycling program.

From the three kinds of plastic collected, only No. 2 plastic, which includes milk bottles, has a steady market. Sanipac is working on finding a market for No. 1 plastic, which is used to make liter soda bottles and is the only kind of plastic approved to recycle into food containers.

Old milk bottles cannot be recycled into new food containers because the recycling process does not completely purify the plastic.

There is no constant market for No. 5 plastic, which includes yogurt containers.

Glines said Goodwill tries to save the No. 5 plastic collected until there is a market, but it often ends up in a landfill.

Another objection raised by OSPIRG is that the pyrolysis process is a new and untested one, whereas other recycling methods work.

"It's a complete experimental process," Aunan said. "They're not helping companies in Oregon that are doing real plastic recycling."

"The plastic industry is putting millions of dollars into pyrolysis which they should use for recycling," Ericsson said.

Meszaros said he hopes pyrolysis will complement other means of recycling plastic rather than replace it.

"We don't want soda bottles and milk jugs," he said. "We want those to be recycled mechanically."

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