

Polystyrene makes comeback as food packaging material



CHAD PATTESON/Emerald

After discontinuing the use of polystyrene in food packaging during the 1980s, many restaurants and franchises are using the material again.

By Allison Hewitt
Freelance Reporter

When knowledge about the harmful effects of the use and production of Styrofoam surfaced in the mid-1980's, the restaurant industry was urged by environmentalists to consider a more environmentally safe alternative. So, while one form of Styrofoam (which is actually the brand name for the compound polystyrene) was phased out, another was phased in.

Although the kind of polystyrene used now in most food-service establishments is made without the use of chlorofluorocarbons — chemicals that contribute to depletion of the ozone — there is still some question about the overall effectiveness of polystyrene as an environmentally sound packaging material.

Chris Taylor, an OSPIRG member who helped implement the Styrofoam ban in Portland food-service establishments, said while the actual production process of polystyrene has improved, there are still problems with the post-consumer phase.

Taylor said although poly-

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styrene is recyclable in theory, most areas in the country do not have the capabilities to recycle the material.

“There are maybe one or two facilities in the nation that take Styrofoam,” Taylor said. “The closest one in our area is down in southern California, so any restaurant around here that recycles it has to have it hauled down there. So there's exhaust pollution to factor in as well.”

Many restaurants have responded to criticism from environmentalists by either phasing out or greatly reducing the use of polystyrene. McDonald's, for example, now uses polystyrene only for its coffee cups and breakfast platters — a big change from the clam-shell foam containers that

dominated the fast-food industry in the 1980s.

But some people claim the benefits of polystyrene are far greater than many other packaging materials, namely paper. Jason Landau, owner of the Eugene restaurant Andrew Smash's, said polystyrene is not only more cost-effective than paper products, it is also recyclable.

“The real advantage for us is that we can recycle it,” Landau said. “Paper cups that have a wax coating on them can't be recycled at all, but polystyrene is a totally recyclable product. That's really important to us.”

While polystyrene is a recyclable material, some argue that it is simply recycled into an end-use product that ultimately ends up in a landfill.

Landau admits he has encountered some resistance to the amount of polystyrene used in his restaurant, but he still believes it is the most environmentally sound choice for food packaging.

Landau said he would rather use a material that can be recycled at least once than a material that goes immediately to a landfill after just one use.



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