

McDonald's Launches Pilot Program to Drop Polystyrene Coffee Cups

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McDonald's has just announced a major environmental initiative: The company is launching a pilot program to phase out polystyrene beverage cups (McD's long ago gave up Styrofoam for its food packaging, but hot beverages have still been served in polystyrene).

The move comes in response to [a 2011 shareholder resolution](#) [PDF] by **As You Sow**, which asked the company to re-evaluate the use of foam cups. The company recently informed us it is testing replacement of polystyrene with a double-walled paper hot cup at approximately 2,000 of its restaurants in the U.S., primarily on the West Coast -- that represents nearly 15 percent its U.S. restaurants.

The shareholder proposal received the support of nearly 30 percent of total company shares voted, a high result for an environmental issue proposal, and the highest vote to date for any **As You Sow** proposal on recycling.

The ongoing controversy about the environmental impacts of polystyrene led McDonald's to phase out foam-based clamshell food containers amid concerns that petroleum-based food packaging that persists in the environment for hundreds of years after use.

Over the next decade, McDonald's eliminated more than 300 million pounds of packaging and reduced restaurant waste by 30 percent, saving an estimated \$6 million per year. It is now one of the largest purchasers of recycled paper, used in its food containers, bags, and napkins.

Polystyrene is controversial because the International Agency for Research on Cancer has determined that styrene, used to make polystyrene, is a possible human carcinogen. In 2009, the California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment proposed that styrene be listed as a known human carcinogen.

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Polystyrene is not widely recycled. The Environmental Protection Agency's annual report on solid waste recycling lists polystyrene cup recycling as "negligible." Foam particles are among the most common items found by environmental groups leading beach cleanups. Foam cups and containers break into small pieces that are easily blown in all directions by the wind.

Carried through storm drains to the ocean, foam containers break down into small indigestible pellets which animals perceive as food, resulting in the death of birds and fish. Due to such concerns, more than 50 cities in California and 100 cities in the U.S. have banned or restricted the use of polystyrene food packaging.



The objective of the McDonald's pilot is to assess customer acceptance, operational impact, and overall performance of the paper cups. The hope is that the company will make the switch to paper cups permanent and expand it to all of its restaurants. Also, given its history of using high levels of recycled content in other food packaging, we hope that it begins to use recycled content in the paper cups and establishes a robust recycling program for both post-consumer waste left in its restaurants.

Our focus on McDonald's is part of a larger initiative asking all companies that put packaging on the market to take full responsibility for post-consumer collection and recycling through implementation of extended producer responsibility policies. To be able to accomplish this, companies need to shift to more recyclable materials and to accept financial responsibility for post-consumer collection and recycling.

In recent years, McDonald's has challenged Starbucks' dominance of the away from home premium coffee market. It's time for an eco-rivalry as well: can the Golden Arches match the Seattle company's commitment to recycle all post-consumer beverage cups left in its stores -- be they paper, foam or polypropylene? Will it also offer discounts for using reusable mugs?

Dunkin' Donuts, which also serves hot beverages in foam cups, announced last fall that it was considering alternatives. In its latest CSR report, the company states:

We realize that the most prominent sustainability issue we must deal with is our Dunkin' Donuts foam cup. While there is currently no single-use hot beverage cup on the market that meets our criteria for performance cost and recyclability, we are committed to solving this and other packaging issues, by working with our industry partners, manufacturers and material engineering researchers. In addition, we have initiated a variety of in-store tests including reusable mug programs and recycling programs for everything from cups to coffee grounds.

As You Sow will be approaching other competitors including Yum! Brands, Tully's, and Peets to ask them to recycle the cups left in their stores. This is one of many crucial steps needed to promote sustainable production and consumption of consumer goods as we work to accommodate 9 billion people who will be living on Earth by 2050.