

McDonald's Testing Paper Cups for Hot Drinks

By Emily Bryson York, 5:07 p.m. CDT, March 21, 2012

McDonald's is testing paper coffee cups in many of its West Coast restaurants. The move comes in the wake of a shareholder resolution asking the Oak Brook-based burger giant to seek alternatives, and proposals to ban polystyrene in California.

"(Consumers) care about where their food comes from, how people are treated, impacts on the earth," said Bob Langert, vice president of sustainability at McDonald's USA. "And they want to do business with people who care about the same things they care about." Finding an alternative to polystyrene, he said, "is all upside."



McDonald's is looking to replace polystyrene coffee cups with more eco-friendly paper ones. (Edgard Garrido/Tribune)

The material is particularly unpopular with environmentally sensitive consumers because it can harm marine life when it ends up in waterways and begins to break down.

McDonald's began a 2,000 store test of double-walled paper cups in January, which will continue into the summer. Langert said it's too soon to comment on how things are going. While legislation has been "a factor," he said "it's not the determining factor," in launching the test. Langert added that McDonald's has been looking at alternatives to polystyrene "for decades."

Conrad MacKerron of corporate accountability group **As You Sow** described the move as "a great first step for McDonald's."

"Given the company's history of using high levels of recycled content in other food packaging, we hope that it follows suit with its cups and also establishes a robust recycling program for post-consumer waste left in its restaurants," he said in a statement. MacKerron's group introduced a shareholder proposal last summer, asking McDonald's to consider alternatives to polystyrene.

McDonald's phased out Styrofoam clamshells for its food in 1990 and subsequently reduced its packaging needs by 300 million pounds per year. Nearly 30 percent of the company's paper packaging is recycled, for items like napkins, Happy Meal boxes, sandwich containers and carryout bags.

Not all environmental groups were as upbeat on the paper-cup test.

"We applaud all corporate efforts to use more sustainable packaging material whatever they may be, but there are inherent trade-offs with any material," said Rob Wallace, a spokesman for Keep America Beautiful. "No disposable product is environmentally benign."

Langert said that polystyrene has been hard to quit because it's lightweight and insulates products well. And while lighter-weight products require less material to produce, and less fuel to transport, they're also made from non-renewable

materials. Polystyrene is also recyclable, although it's not widely done.

Paper cups, on the other hand, are made from renewable resources, but weigh two to three times more, and aren't generally recyclable. Langert said paper cups are also marginally more expensive, and would require start-up investment for mass production.

McDonald's isn't the only chain that's been sticking with Styrofoam. Dunkin' Donuts and Sonic also use the material for beverage cups. Dunkin' said last fall that it would explore alternative packaging. Neither company immediately responded to requests for comment on this story.