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Waste officials see positive response after plastic bottle ban

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When North Carolina moved to kick the can from landfills in 1994, the message that aluminum being tossed out in the trash was illegal got crushed by public apathy.

But when the state moved to ban plastic bottles from the dump effective Oct. 1, the response was overwhelming.

So what changed this time around?

Buzz, good and bad, said Scott Mouw, the state's recycling director.

"We worked hard to get the message out, and the media did too," he said.

But officials think there was another reason this recycling push got legs quickly: the sour economy.

"The idea of not filling precious landfill space with something that we can reuse really resonates with people," Mouw said. "But being able to do something at home that can create jobs and help turn the economy around, especially in a recession – I think that got people thinking in a different way."

Reusing recyclables, turning them into bottles and even parts of carpets, is seen as a growth segment in a state that's been hard-hit by the economic downturn.

Although state officials won't have a good handle on how much plastic recycling has gone up statewide until they do some survey work this spring, there's anecdotal evidence that it has increased significantly.

Mouw said solid waste offices around the state have been inundated with phone calls from residents wanting to make sure they're recycling the right types of plastic – and not breaking the law if a plastic bottle ends up in their garbage can. (They're not.)

Bill Reed, Wilmington's solid waste director, said his office has received much more interest in the city's voluntary curbside recycling program since the buzz about the bottle ban began picking up steam this summer.

"With the aluminum ban, we didn't see a ripple," he said. "Now we're seeing a big spike."

In Brunswick County, Kim Thompson said her office's phone has been ringing off the hook.

"I think it was the timing more than the ban itself," said the county's solid waste recycling coordinator, noting that the push to be environmentally responsible is surging among businesses and households. "Right now, green is the thing to be."

Lynn Bestul, New Hanover County's recycling director, said residents hit the bottle-ban deadline running.

He said plastics recycling at the county's six drop-off sites was up 9 percent last month over October 2008 levels, and the month-over-month increase is expected to continue as more people get in the habit.

"We're now having to pull our plastic containers almost every day," Bestul said, adding that it used to be about once every three days. "It's really increased unbelievably."

The boom in plastics is part of a larger trend in the public's view of recycling – fueled in part by an increasing number of items that legislators have banned from landfills.

A couple years ago, the county handled about 1,400 tons of recyclables. In 2008-09, it handled nearly 4,000 tons with the same number of employees.

"We're pretty much maxed out," Bestul said.

That's put pressure on the county's recycling budget, especially since the market for recyclables is still extremely depressed, and facilities that are struggling to handle the increased loads.

But he said it's not a bad problem to have.

"We're not going to complain if people are keeping things out of the landfill," Bestul said.

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