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CoRR Pilot Programs Improve Foodservice Recyclability

by Len Prazych

Lily Kelly, Interim Director of Global Green's Coalition on Resource Recovery (CoRR) made a compelling case for the effectiveness of CoRR's pilot programs to members of the New Jersey Paper Recycling Association on Monday, November 19, at Il Villaggio in Carlstadt, New Jersey. Global Green is the U.S. Chapter of Green Cross International, which was founded by Mikhail Gorbachev to foster a value shift to a sustainable and secure future by reconnecting humanity with the environment. The U.S. chapter is one of 30 affiliates around the world.



Lily Kelly

CoRR's main focus is on pilot projects. Kelly's presentation on Recovering Paper Foodservice Packaging detailed CoRR's success at using two of its pilot programs to determine the recyclability of coated coffee cups and windowed packaging.

"The fun part for us is when we work with corporate partners to deploy systems that can recover waste in ways that are cost effective, increase diversion and have an environmental benefit," said Kelly, who noted that historically, coated food and beverage packaging has been a barrier to recovery. CoRR's pilot programs with Starbucks and Pret A Manger, a New York City quick service restaurant (QSR), however, have proven otherwise.

CoRR approached the pilots from a scientific perspective. Its first small scale pilot was done at Starbucks. The research question was whether Starbucks coated coffee cups, could be recycled at mills that accept OCC. Pre-consumer cups were tested at Western Michigan University's (WMU) pilot mill and determined that they were indeed repulpable and recyclable. Then, post-consumer cups from seven Starbucks locations in New York City were collected and tested. It was determined that they were also repulpable and recyclable, with no microbial problems.

CoRR's pilot program with Pret A Manger was slightly different because a variety of paper packaging, including PE coated and windowed packaging, was being tested. Further, CoRR questioned whether a purity level of 85 percent or better could be achieved when the material was recycled

on common mill equipment. Again, pre-consumer packaging was lab-tested and again, it was determined to be repulpable and recyclable.

CoRR went a step further in testing a mix of unsorted post-consumer packaging for repulpability and recyclability. Again, the results were positive. Finally, it undertook a waste characterization to measure the success of the program and determined that stream purities were good and diversion at participating locations reached 55 percent, near Pret A Manger's corporate goal of 75 percent.

A summary of the findings indicated that consumers will indeed sort if they are given sufficient clues, like named and colored bins. More important, the coated and windowed products tested were found to be recyclable and repulpable in accordance with FBA and WMU recyclability protocols.

CoRR's findings also revealed that restaurants want to recycle, but it needs to be cost effective for them and their haulers. Also, much foodservice packaging can be recycled by common mill types and waste haulers will indeed accept it if there is a demand by paper mills.

And there is demand. Based on the positive results from CoRR's pilot programs with Starbucks and Pret A Manger, mills are interested in the post-consumer coated packaging as a consistent source of long fibers and want to test it on a large scale in controlled trials. Kelly said that six mills have already signed on to participate.

CoRR's next task is helping collect the 10 tons of post-consumer packaging required for the full-scale mill trials, a goal CoRR expects to achieve by the end of 2013. The next step will be determining thresholds, documenting the outcomes and spreading the results. The final step will be getting the word out to QSRs and helping them figure out what the most recoverable materials are.

Another positive result of CoRR's pilot programs is that Starbucks and Pret A Manger's haulers now accept post-consumer foodservice packaging in New York. "Haulers have found a new market and it is indeed cost effective," said Kelly. "This is a good story because we can bring the entire supply chain together and have a really good outcome. Everybody wins."