

Mr. Richard McWhorter  
P.O. Box 2  
North Star, OH 45350

Dear Mr. McWhorter:

Thank you for your letter of April 13, 2002, to Administrator Whitman in which you expressed concerns with the management of plastic wastes. Due to the waste-related nature of your questions, your letter was forwarded to this office for a response.

In your letter you suggested that mandatory recycling be implemented for plastic containers to avoid disposal in the waste stream. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) promotes a hierarchy of waste management options based on the impacts on the environment and the potential to increase sustainability. Waste prevention (which includes product reuse) is highest on this hierarchy, followed by recycling (including composting) and finally disposal through landfilling or combustion. While you ask in your letter that EPA require more plastic collection and recycling, we do not currently have any legislative authority to do this. Instead, we focus the majority of our effort on education and on providing funding to innovative activities.

In general, plastics are one of the most difficult to recycle of the various recyclable commodity types. In our most recent characterization study of Municipal Solid Waste (which uses data from 2000), we found that plastics are recycled at a rate of 5.6 percent, well below the 30 percent national average for all commodity types. States have attempted to improve the plastics recycling rate by using their legislative authority in a variety of ways. Ten states (including the state of California) now have bottle bills, which require a deposit for plastic and aluminum beverage containers. Certain other states such as Oregon have passed packaging recycling laws which require all packaging to be recycled at a certain minimum percentage and California currently has recycled content standards for newsprint, glass and plastic bags.

Plastic wastes have not been recycled at rates approaching other recyclable commodities due to the many difficulties with contamination, with cost-effective transportation and due to the low market value of this material. It is extremely difficult to “close the loop” with this material--to make new plastic items from old plastic (though much progress has been made). Our efforts to-date have concentrated on creating better markets, improving collection efficiencies and on

working with industry to improve the recyclability of the materials. Our Jobs Through Recycling (JTR) program concentrates on improving the marketplace for recyclables. It provides support to state programs designed to foster the start-up and expansion of businesses that process and manufacture recycled products. For more information about the JTR program, view our Website at ([www.epa.gov/jtr](http://www.epa.gov/jtr)). We have also worked with the Solid Waste Association of North America ([www.swana.org](http://www.swana.org)) to develop collection efficiency training to improve the economics of state and local collection programs.

We will continue to encourage the plastics industry to continue their voluntary efforts to increase the recycling rates of plastics--and encourage you to call the American Plastics Council at 1-800-2HELP-90 if you have questions about the industry's efforts to increase recycling. If enough people are concerned about the recyclability of plastics, and make the effort to recycle and buy material produced from the recycled material, more markets will emerge and more locations will become available to bring your recyclable materials.

Thank you for your interest in this issue and for your actions in writing to the Administrator and expressing your concerns.

Sincerely yours,

Marianne Lamont Horinko  
Assistant Administrator

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