

By Kevin T. Higgins, Senior Editor



Earth Day observations still net piles of aluminum cans and other recyclables, but everyday efforts lag considerably. Source: Anheuser-Busch Companies Inc.

Is packaging waste off the radar?

While source reduction and recycling programs have advanced elsewhere, U.S. efforts to reduce packaging waste are stuck on hold.

IN THE NOT-TOO-DISTANT PAST, FOOD AND BEVERAGE FIRMS assumed it was just a matter of time before they faced a mandate to reduce packaging materials in landfills or pay stiff fines. They're still waiting, and the debris keeps piling up.

In 1960, Americans generated 2.7 lbs. of garbage per capita per day, exclusive of industrial and mining waste, according to the U.S. EPA's Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response. Despite the subsequent start of the environmental movement, the figure rose to 3.7 lbs. by 1990 and 4.5 lbs. by 2000, when total tonnage reached 232 million, almost triple the amount from 40 years earlier.

Industry attempts to address the problem have enjoyed limited success. Eight years ago, DuPont Teijin Films launched a program in which packing materials, film waste, wooden pallets and "pretty much anything we send out" is picked up from customers' plants and brought to sorting depots operated by Greenpak, according to Ronald S. Auberger, manager of DuPont's returnable program. Positive cash flow is generated for DuPont, Greenpak and the customer, but selling the program is an uphill

battle, Auberger says. With management ranks being thinned, finding a champion within client organizations can be difficult, he says.

Advocacy groups like the Container Recycling Institute (CRI) believe deposit laws are the most effective way to reverse the escalation in bottles, cans and other beverage containers that end up in landfills. Two years ago, Hawaii became the tenth state with a deposit-law. In Michigan, where a 10 cents per container deposit has been in effect since the 1970s, 95 percent of beverage containers are redeemed, according to Jenny Gitlitz, CRI's research director.

"We get criticized for targeting less than 5 percent of the waste stream, but recycling has to start somewhere," Gitlitz says. Based on figures from industry groups, recycling efforts are losing ground: only 31 percent of soft-drink containers were returned in 2002, down from 46 percent in 1995, and the "wasting rate" of PET resins equaled 2 billion lbs. in 2002, a fivefold increase in 10 years.

Environmental stewardship can be effective, as the Anheuser-Busch Recycling Corp. has demonstrated. The unit of the St. Louis brewery recycles 750 million lbs. of aluminum a year, more than the parent uses to package its beer. In addition, engineering design

changes in 2002 shaved 1.3 million lbs. from the aluminum the corporation used for its cans. Other changes trimmed 10.5 million lbs. of paperboard used.

Besides aluminum, A-B recycles almost 4 billion lbs. of plastics, glass, wood and other materials. Those efforts and other environmental programs were cited by the Keep America Beautiful organization in bestowing its Vision for America Award last fall to A-B.

Beverage container waste piles up

	1982	1992	2002
Aluminum cans	20 billion	30 billion	50 billion
Glass bottles	18 billion	14 billion	25 billion
PET bottles	4 billion	6 billion	35 billion
HDPE bottles		4 billion	6 billion

Source: The Container Recycling Institute.