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National Trade Industry Groups Fund Study to Identify Ways to Improve Efficiencies in Recycling Facilities

Research yields actionable information to optimize recycling of broad list of materials

DENTON, Texas—What steps can a resident take to ensure the items they place in a recycling container end up successfully being recycled into new products? And once at a recycling facility, how does one item make it all the way to the correct bale while another ends up in the wrong one, or worse, in the residue and ultimately, the landfill?

Packaging companies want to ensure the packages they put in the marketplace are properly managed at end-of-life, instead of ending up in the landfill. Five national trade associations representing a wide range of packaging types, including the [American Chemistry Council \(ACC\)](#), [Association of Postconsumer Plastics Recyclers \(APR\)](#), [Carton Council of North America \(CCNA\)](#), [Foodservice Packaging Institute \(FPI\)](#) and the [National Association for PET Container Resources \(NAPCOR\)](#), joined together to commission a study to find ways to optimize the recycling of their packaging after it goes into the bin or cart. The study specifically evaluated where packages end up in a sorting facility, why packages flow in certain ways and what potential changes to the sorting processes could improve recovery.

The “[MRF Material Flow Study](#)” uniquely looks at how numerous materials flow through several different types of materials recovery facilities (MRFs) with the goal of better understanding how to get more recyclables actually recycled.

“The recycling facility is where the proverbial rubber meets the road when it comes to recycling,” said Derric Brown, vice president of sustainability for the Carton Council of North America and director of sustainability for Evergreen Packaging. “Even in a community with a robust recycling program inclusive of many materials, such as cartons or rigid plastics, if those items do not flow efficiently through a sorting facility and to the right place, all or some of their value may be lost and they may end up as residue, possibly in a landfill. We understand that managing programs and motivating consumers to recycle is challenging enough, so we want to help by finding and communicating the study findings.”

Five U.S. MRFs were selected for the study, representing a range of operations, including those of different sizes and processing different recycling streams (single- and dual-stream). Materials, including paper and plastic cups, clamshells, containers, domes/trays, bottles, tubs, lids and gable-top and aseptic cartons, were added to the mix of standard recycling items coming in to the facilities. Materials were processed and then sample bales of paper, plastic and residue were tested, with bale contents being sorted into more than 100 categories, to where the materials flowed naturally, without intervention from the MRF operators.

“The study reinforced that everyone plays a role in ensuring recycling is effective and efficient, and that there are actions that can be taken at all steps in the process to help ensure items get their maximum value when they are recycled,” said Jim Frey, CEO of Resource Recycling Systems (RRS), one of the architects of the study. “One such action is asking residents, and other recycling customers, not to flatten items before placing them in recycling containers. The study found that three-dimensional objects (packages in their original form) versus two-dimensional (flattened/crushed objects) have a higher likelihood of making it through the system to the appropriate container lines and bales. This is not only a helpful finding but an actionable one which illustrates that even everyday actions in the home can help boost recovery.”

Key findings from the study:

1. **Size and shape make a difference** – Items tend to flow with similarly sized and shaped materials, so containers shouldn’t be completely flattened or crushed by residents before being placed in their recycling bin or cart. Additionally, package form and stiffness influences flow. Materials that hold their shape have a higher likelihood of making it to the right bale.
2. **Good separation is important** – Maintaining equipment to ensure efficient sorting is critical.
3. **Optical sorters can help identify material types** – As the recycling stream evolves into being more diverse and lightweight, optical sorters play an increasingly important role.

For more information on these findings, please refer to our infographic and executive summary, which can be found at www.CartonOpportunities.org/MRFStudy.

The organizations look forward to finding ways to apply this knowledge to increase recovery and working closely with stakeholders, such as communities and facilities. The study was developed and delivered by RRS, Reclay StewardEdge and Moore Recycling Associates. To access the study, learn more from the funders and about how facilities and communities can apply the learnings, visit www.CartonOpportunities.org/MRFStudy.

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ABOUT THE AMERICAN CHEMISTRY COUNCIL

The Plastics Division of the American Chemistry Council (ACC) represents leading resin manufacturers and advocates for unlimited opportunities for plastics and promotes their economic, environmental and societal benefits. The Plastics Division creates value for its members by promoting the use of plastics in key end use markets and by demonstrating through proactive programs and partnerships the sustainability of plastic products. For more information, visit www.americanchemistry.com/plastics.

ABOUT THE ASSOCIATION OF POSTCONSUMER PLASTIC RECYCLERS

The Association of Postconsumer Plastic Recyclers (APR) is the “Voice of Plastics Recycling™.” APR represents companies who acquire, reprocess and sell the byproduct of more than 90 percent of the postconsumer plastic processing capacity in the U.S., Canada and Mexico. Membership includes independent recycling companies of all sizes, processing numerous resins, as well as consumer product companies, equipment manufacturers, testing laboratories, organizations. and others committed to the

success of plastics recycling. APR advocates the recycling of all postconsumer plastic. For more information, visit PlasticsRecycling.org.

ABOUT THE CARTON COUNCIL

The Carton Council is composed of four leading carton manufacturers, Elopak, SIG Combibloc, Evergreen Packaging and Tetra Pak, as well as an associate member, Weyerhaeuser. Formed in 2009, the Carton Council works to deliver long-term collaborative solutions in order to divert valuable cartons from the landfill. Through a united effort, the Carton Council is committed to building a sustainable infrastructure for carton recycling nationwide and works toward their continual goal of adding access to carton recycling throughout the U.S. For more information, visit www.CartonOpportunities.org.

ABOUT THE FOODSERVICE PACKAGING INSTITUTE

Established in 1933, the Foodservice Packaging Institute (FPI) is the trade association for the foodservice packaging industry in North America. FPI's members include raw material and machinery suppliers, packaging converters, foodservice distributors and operators/retailers. FPI's Paper Recovery Alliance and Plastics Recovery Group are working to increase the recovery of paper and plastic foodservice packaging products. For more information, visit FPI.org.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR PET CONTAINER RESOURCES

Founded in 1987, the National Association for PET Container Resources (NAPCOR) is the trade association for the PET plastic packaging industry in the United States and Canada. NAPCOR is dedicated to promoting the PET package; to overcoming hurdles to the successful recycling of PET; and to communicating the attributes of the PET container as a sustainable package. For more information, visit Napcor.com.