

William Merry: Chance to reuse, reduce, recycle

By WILLIAM MERRY

Guest commentary

09/30/2009

As the 25th annual California Coastal Cleanup Day was observed in the state Sept. 19, more than 67,000 volunteers turned out to help clean beaches and waterways. Locally, the state parks staff coordinated sponsors and volunteers for a record 19 cleanup locations in Monterey County, ranging from Upper Carr Lake in Salinas to Arroyo Seco River in Los Padres National Forest, from Big Sur to Moss Landing.

This year, 1,422 volunteers collected more than 6,000 pounds of trash and recyclable items in Monterey County. Each volunteer completed a data card itemizing the debris, everything from cigarette butts to shopping bags. Plastic and packaging, along with cigarette butts, represented a large majority of the debris collected locally and statewide.

All those bits of plastic in the sand represent a problem, and an opportunity. The problem with plastic take-out food packaging is that while it may have a useful life of 30 minutes to carry the contents home, it essentially lasts forever whether it is in a landfill or littered into the environment.

In an effort to crack down on polystyrene cups, plates and clamshells, Carmel, Pacific Grove and Monterey have implemented policies that require the use of environmentally friendly biodegradable or recyclable alternatives. It is encouraging to hear that additional Peninsula cities along with Monterey County will consider similar ordinances in the coming months.

From the standpoint of sustainability, the best environmental solution to dealing with packaging waste and litter may not be recycling or composting, but reducing the staggering volume of packaging and products being generated and consumed. While emissions resulting from personal transportation often get first look at how we can reduce our individual carbon footprints, new studies suggest that the "provision of goods," including products and packaging, represent as much as 44 percent of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

Connecticut has recently identified waste prevention and recycling as one of its top 10 strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Product designs that improve durability, the ability to reuse or repair a product rather than throwing it away, and supporting recyclability can have a big impact in reducing emissions. We've all heard of the "reduce, reuse and recycle" approach to managing our discards. When it comes to personal consumption habits, perhaps it is time to reconsider the importance of reducing and reusing.

The 25th anniversary of Coastal Cleanup Day is an appropriate occasion to reflect about how the generation of waste, and the composition of litter on our beaches, has changed over the years. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, more than 52 million tons of containers and packaging were generated in the United States in 1984. Today, this category of the accounts for more than 79 million tons annually.

The observance is a good opportunity to recognize the efforts of the many volunteers, businesses and public agencies that come together to help solve a problem. It is also a reminder that we can all play a part every day to reduce, reuse, recycle.

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