

The Milk Carton Conundrum

Milk cartons, one of the most common items in our kitchens, are shining a light on the complexity of modern packaging materials and how the ideals of recycling don't always match the realities.

Once lined with wax, contemporary milk cartons are now lined with a thin layer of polyethylene film plastic. Other "poly-lined" or "poly-coated" paper products include to-go coffee cups, coated paper plates, ice cream cartons, and some paper take-out containers.

Because of variations in back-end processing, poly-lined paper packaging is managed inconsistently in Alameda County. Some jurisdictions direct residents and businesses to place them in organics bins for composting, others direct them to recycling bins, and others to garbage.

This is an emerging issue with no easily identified short-term solution for Alameda County or the broader recycling and composting industries. Residents and businesses should look to their city or waste hauler to determine proper disposal of these items for now. Longer term, cities, waste haulers and regional policy makers will need to make a concerted and coordinated effort to find a universally accepted solution to the "milk carton conundrum."



In addition to milk cartons, poly-lined paper is commonly used in many other food-service products, including paper cups, plates, bowls, and to-go containers.

