



DATE: March 27, 2019

TO: Waste Management Authority Board

FROM: Wendy Sommer, Executive Director

BY: Justin Lehrer, Senior Management Analyst

SUBJECT: The Milk Carton Conundrum

SUMMARY

At the March 27 WMA meeting staff will share information and lead a brief discussion on the messaging challenges our industry faces when it comes to proper management and discard of increasingly complex packaging materials.

DISCUSSION

The Agency's Topic Brief for this month, titled "The Milk Carton Conundrum," shines a light on the complexity of modern packaging materials and how the ideals of recycling do not always match the realities when it comes to sorting, processing, and marketing the materials. The primary purpose of consumer packaging is product protection, but packaging is also heavily influenced by corporate marketing requirements, sustainability concerns, and other factors. Packaging typically serves as the main "billboard" and means of communicating product info, and is often a focus for innovation. These factors often lead to changes in packaging that are not always designed with a full understanding of the implications for end-of-use.

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

Poly-coated containers require specialized equipment to separate the paper from the plastic. If included in the compost, they leave a plastic residue in the compost that can make its way into waterways or soil used to grow food. In the recycling, the containers risk introducing food and liquid contaminants in addition to the problematic plastic film.

Poly-coated paper packaging is currently managed inconsistently in Alameda County, with some jurisdictions directing residents and businesses to place them in organics bins for composting, others directing them to recycling bins, and others to garbage. The inconsistent messaging is

confusing to the public. Staff has surveyed our member agencies to understand the differences in messaging to Alameda County residents. Currently, 13 jurisdictions are accepting poly-coated paper cartons in the organics bin and 10 accept them in the recycling bin (7 accept cartons in either stream). Several jurisdictions are considering revisions which would ultimately restrict poly-coated paper from the organics bin.

We will be interviewing more recyclers to understand how and which poly-coated paper products can be managed in the recycling stream. We also want to better understand the level of food and beverage residue that would be acceptable to recycling.

This is an emerging issue with no easily identified short-term solution for Alameda County or the broader recycling and composting industries. At the March 27 meeting, staff will distribute the Topic Brief, share what it has learned to date and what additional work is needed to progress towards a universally accepted solution to the “milk carton conundrum.”

RECOMMENDATION

This item is for information only.