

BUSINESS

New Bans on Foam Products Worry Mobil : Firm's Ads Take On Environmental Concerns

L.A. Times Archives

June 28, 1988 12 AM PT

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

CANANDAIGUA, N.Y. — The nation's garbage crisis has created a public relations nightmare for the companies that supply foam egg cartons, Big Mac containers and salad bar boxes.

The brightly colored plastic-based products that were hailed as miracle containers for their strength and ability to hold heat are now atop the hit lists of environmentalists, and politicians are scurrying to sign their names to anti-foam laws.

From Suffolk County on Long Island to state cafeterias in Albany, to New Jersey's Capitol, lawmakers are claiming victory in their crusade against crunchy foam packaging.

All the attention is making workers at Mobil Chemical Co. nervous.

"People are using Suffolk County to get a Berkeley to change and then a Los Angeles, and so on and so on," said Robert Barrett, the Mobil executive in charge of defending foam.

Jobs at Stake

Mobil is spending tens of thousands of dollars in an elaborate public relations campaign to slow the spread of laws that make it illegal to use foam containers.

Through full-page newspaper and magazine ads headlined “Foam fast-food containers: the scapegoat, not the problem” and “The proposed Suffolk ban on plastics: a mistake-- not a solution,” Mobil is saying that plastic foam is not a significant part of the solid waste crisis.

The jobs of Mobil’s 675 workers in Canandaigua, 25 miles southeast of Rochester, clearly hang in the balance as the foam battle is fought in city council chambers and state legislatures nationwide.

Other Mobil plants in Covington, Ga.; Temple, Texas; Frankfort, Ill.; and Bakersfield combine to churn out one-third of the nation’s egg cartons, along with millions of foam containers for restaurants.

“I would hope that they could make other products,” New York Consumer Protection Board Chairman Richard Kessel said of Mobil. “We are drowning in our own packaging. . . . We’re going into supermarkets and getting double paper bags put into plastic bags.”

ADVERTISEMENT

Kessel, who joined Gov. Mario Cuomo on June 9 in announcing an experimental foam recycling program at downstate McDonald's outlets, said he favors a "planned phase-out" of all foam packaging.

"There's time for them to think about making alternate materials," Kessel said.

Environmentalists gained momentum in their fight to ban foam after a barge bearing Long Island garbage plied the seas for several months last year in an unsuccessful and widely reported attempt to unload its 3,100 tons of trash.

Anti-foam activists point to the inability of foam containers to biodegrade, the large amount of landfill space they occupy, and possible pollution resulting from their incineration.

Foam manufacturers also have been criticized for using chlorofluorocarbons, such as freon, as a blowing agent during production. Such chemicals have been proven to deplete the earth's ozone layer.

Mobil counters that the wax- and plastic-coated paper containers that would replace polystyrene in no-foam communities are equally poor at biodegrading. And Barrett maintains that foam containers make up only 2% of the refuse in landfills, far less than paper, glass and other plastics.

In addition, Mobil scientists said foam does not give off harmful chemicals when burned properly. The concern over chlorofluorocarbons is unwarranted, Mobil maintains, because of an industrywide phase-out of the product.

"My biggest stumbling block is the misconception about what people are saying about plastics," Barrett said. "You have activists saying plastic can't be recycled. That can't be further from the truth."

Plastic recycling already exists in the soft-drink bottle industry, where so-called PET polymer bottles are melted into plastic landscape ties and other products.

More to Read

Red Lobster offered customers all-you-can-eat shrimp. That was a mistake

May 14, 2024



Tesla to cut 601 jobs in Bay Area, a sign of more problems for EV maker

2 hours ago



Erewhon sues city to stop Sportsmen's Lodge development in Studio City

May 13, 2024

