

## **WMU takes leading role in recycling of fast food containers**

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KALAMAZOO--Imagine going to a fast food restaurant and not seeing a trashcan.

A recycle bin is the only thing you'll need.

That's the idea behind an effort to eventually allow all fast food containers, from cups to food boxes, to be readily recyclable after customers finish their meals. And Western Michigan University's Paper, Recycling and Coating Pilot Plants are playing a leading role. The plants have teamed up with Global Green and its Coalition for Resource Recovery (CoRR) to bring the recycling effort to the fast food and packaging industries.

The recycling initiative is starting with Starbucks coffee cups, says Joel Kendrick, director of the WMU Paper Pilot Plants, which have become key players in certifying paper products as recyclable. Kendrick recently participated in a forum and workshop hosted by Starbucks in Seattle. At the end of June, he was asked to present WMU Pilot Plants' new recycling certification process at a summit in New York City, which was attended by a who's who in the paper, recycling and fast food industries.

"Right now, Global Green is focusing on Manhattan and Starbucks stores," Kendrick says. "Starbucks sends two billion fiber cups to the landfill every year. So they're trying to capture the approximately 15 to 20 percent of the in-store business where the coffee cups don't leave the store."

WMU's pilot plants have been heavily involved in defining the process for certifying fiber-based products, including food and beverage containers, for repulpability and recyclability. And when the products or cups are not recyclable, Kendrick and his pilot facilities help the retailers, converters and paper mills attain recycling certification. The WMU Pilot Plants are one of only three sites in North America capable of doing that.

Other fast food and packaging companies have shown a great interest in the recycling effort, which is being spearheaded by Global Green and CoRR. Kendrick has published a white paper with CoRR that details how spent cups and food packaging show a potential to be certified as OCC

(old corrugated cardboard) compatible.

Starbucks has emerged as a test case in the recycling effort because of the company's deep commitment to recycling. Starbucks officials have pledged to recycle all of its coffee cups by the year 2012. Instead of being buried in landfills, the cups can be recycled into new corrugated cardboard boxes.

The trial project is set to kick off in earnest in August, with a nearby paper mill ready to take cups from about 20 Manhattan Starbucks stores and convert them into corrugated cardboard boxes. The WMU Pilot Plants are currently performing certification testing on Starbucks cups in preparation for this test.

"This is just the starting point," Kendrick says. "CoRR wants to collect everything from hamburger clamshells to popcorn buckets at movie theatres. Fast food restaurants alone generate six million tons of paper products that go to landfills every year. That's a lot of pounds and a lot of landfill space. That fiber is only getting one life. We're trying to give that fiber three to five more lives."

Global Green's Chairman of the Board Scott Seydel puts it another way.

"As you are enjoying your coffee at Starbucks, savor the thought that less than a hundred days ago, this paper cup was a tree," Sydel says. "With a little bit of stewardship and, in as little as 72 hours, it can be back in service as a pizza box."

Kendrick, who has spent some three decades in the paper industry, says it's important to conserve landfill space and curb consumption of valuable natural resources.

"My grandson is 8 months old," he says. "I care about the state of the world that his generation will inherit and his children will inherit. There's no reason not to give that fiber three to five additional lives."

For more information, to read research white papers or to contact Kendrick, visit the WMU Pilot Plants Web site at [www.wmich.edu/pilotplants/](http://www.wmich.edu/pilotplants/)