

Overview of 2013 Benchmarking Survey

2013 Benchmarking Survey: Acceptance of Foodservice Packaging by Material Recovery Facilities in the United States and Canada – An Overview

Background

The Foodservice Packaging Institute’s Paper Recovery Alliance (PRA) and Plastics Recovery Group (PRG) bring together stakeholders from throughout the value chain to create solutions for the recovery and processing of used foodservice packaging.

In 2013, Resource Recycling Systems (RRS) was asked by the PRA/PRG to conduct a benchmarking study to determine the current levels of acceptance of 19 specific types of foodservice packaging (FSP) by material recovery facilities (MRFs) in the United States and Canada. Packaging types included various types of cups, containers, boxes and paper bags made from different plastic and paper-based materials, which combined represent approximately two-thirds of the total FSP tonnage in the U.S. and Canada. The survey also sought to identify factors affecting MRFs’ acceptance of the packaging. In addition, it was anticipated that the baseline acceptance levels could provide a basis for measuring progress in the recovery of FSP and could aid the PRA/PRG in identifying packaging types that were approaching key acceptance thresholds important when complying with the Federal Trade Commission’s “Green Guides.”

There were 62 MRFs represented in the study, which included nearly 50 of the largest MRFs in the U.S. and Canada, as well as almost two dozen more MRFs specifically chosen for a variety of factors (such as size, type, geographic location, ownership, etc.). In addition to determining which of the 19 foodservice packaging items each of the MRFs accepted, participants were also asked several qualitative questions related to FSP acceptance, barriers to FSP recycling and future plans for FSP acceptance.



The Results

Acceptance of foodservice packaging is quite widespread and varied greatly.

- On average, the MRFs included in the study accepted 7 out of the 19 types of FSP, and a majority accepted at least 9 of the 19 types. Nearly two-thirds of the MRFs accepted 10 or more of the 19 types of FSP included in the study.
- Three items – cup sleeves, pizza boxes and paper carryout bags – were the most widely accepted FSP items, with over 70 percent acceptance rates among the 62 MRFs included.
- Rigid plastic items such as cups and takeout containers made from polystyrene, polypropylene and PET had the second highest acceptance ratings, between 50 and 70 percent of the MRFs included, however some limitations (such as color) applied.
- Cups, beverage carriers, containers and egg cartons made from coated paper, molded pulp and/or polystyrene foam had the lowest acceptance rates at under 50 percent of the MRFs included in the study.
- Neither the size of MRF (throughput in tons per year) nor the MRF type (single or dual stream) substantially impacted whether the MRF accepted FSP or how many types of FSP the MRF accepted.

Conclusions

The study yielded findings that show foodservice packaging can and is being accepted by MRFs for recycling. And, while this is a small survey and not intended to substantiate claims of recyclability in compliance with the Federal Trade Commission’s “Green Guides,” it shows promise that a number of items are in fact reaching thresholds that might allow these products to be labeled “recyclable” if sufficient access rates are established.

Qualitative comments identified markets as the biggest driver of what is accepted by MRFs, which validates the current activities of the PRA/PRG. The study also identified some areas where the packaging industry, MRFs, and markets may not all be using the same definitions, and points to specific items, materials, and misconceptions that will require additional work by the PRA/PRG to enable more foodservice packaging to be accepted by MRFs.

More information on FPI’s recovery projects may be found at www.fpi.org/stewardship.