

Los Angeles Times

Trash: Southern California's mission to clean up the confusion

By Mary MacVean

January 29, 2011

A report on how to reduce, reuse, recycle, and a bit of history.



Compostable. Biodegradable. Plant-based plastic. What do the terms mean? And in which bin does this stuff belong - black, blue or green? Answers may surprise you. (Steve Sedam / InkPop Studio)

Psst. That coffee cup in your hand. Where will you toss it? Trash bin? Recycling bin? What about the little white bag that has a

few grease spots from your Mexican restaurant chips?

And what happens to those utensils labeled "biodegradable" you bought for a family picnic? Where should you put plastic grocery bags?

The choice of black, blue or green bin is meant to be simple. As the director of the Los Angeles Bureau of Sanitation, Enrique Zaldivar, said, if it's not easy, it doesn't work.

But the stuff of our lives — perhaps especially the things we buy to make our lives easier — is anything but simple.

For instance, some potato chip bags look like they're made of eco-friendly paper, but they might be lined with a substance that not only protects the shelf life of the chips but also prevents the bag from being recycled, Zaldivar said.

That disposable coffee cup, sanitation officials said, might be compostable or recyclable in one community but sent to the landfill in another; the plastic bag and the white chip bag (unless it's really greasy) belong in the blue bin, for recycling.

And those "biodegradable" utensils — part of the wave of corn-based plastics landing on store shelves? It depends. In a landfill, they might not act much differently than other

trash. But they're not like other plastics, so they can't go in the blue bin. They might compost in an industrial composter with other green-bin yard waste, but they are less likely to break down in a lower-temperature home composter — at least not for a long time.

It's little wonder that we make mistakes.

"Obviously, there's a lot of confusion out there. And that's what we want to avoid. We need it to be simple and consistent to the maximum number of people," said Karen Coca, acting division manager of the [Solid Resources](#) Citywide Recycling Division of the Bureau of Sanitation.

L.A. sanitation officials have been talking to companies about an idea they think could reduce the confusion: Get products marked with dots in green (compost), black (garbage) or blue (recycle). But that would be just one step in efforts to raise public awareness of how to reduce, reuse, recycle.

People are catching on

In 2008, Americans generated about 250 million tons of trash, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#). Of that, they recycled 61 million tons, the EPA said, and composted 22 million tons. Containers and packaging of all kinds made up nearly a third of the trash.

Coca has been in the sanitation business for 18 years, since the time homeowners carried little yellow crates of recyclables out to the curb.

At first, people were willing to bundle their papers for recycling, Zaldivar said. But after three or four years, good will gave way to human nature. So eventually, the city added

convenience: no separation needed, just roll a blue bin with mixed paper, plastic and glass out to the curb.

Participation doubled, Zaldivar said.

But only in the last five or six years have people been "really changing how they talk about things — community cleanups, recycling, training kids to recycle," Coca said. "It's becoming more the norm."

She said officials need to take advantage of that change and bring recycling to large apartment buildings and businesses, where waste is collected by private companies. An advocacy group this week issued a study calling for a franchise system with competitive bidding, which the group said could boost recycling.

Los Angeles said that it diverts 65% of its 10 million tons of annual trash from landfills, putting it at the top of big-city efforts, and that the city has a goal of 70% by 2013. That includes recycling plastics and polystyrene marked with Nos. 1 through 7 in those little triangles. The polystyrene cups, containers and packaging can be recycled for use in home building materials, city officials said.

Santa Monica and other California cities, however, have gone even further, banning the use of polystyrene food containers, as has L.A. County in its facilities and concessions. Those containers are derived from petroleum and stay in the environment for hundreds to thousands of years, said Josephine Miller, an environmental analyst in the Santa Monica office of Sustainability and the Environment.

And earlier this week, Santa Monica approved a ban on single-use plastic bags

for most retail outlets, beginning in September. The environmental group Heal the Bay said about 26 million single-use plastic shopping bags are used each year in Santa Monica.

As communities grow savvier about reducing landfill waste, more attention is being paid not just to recycling but also to producing and buying products that more easily return to the earth.

The question of composting

In recent years, environmentally minded companies have turned to compostable packaging — adding another confusing wrinkle.

"It is indeed a bit of a wilderness for consumers," said Scott McDougall, president of TerraChoice, an environmental marketing company that in one study of more than 5,000 consumer products found that 95% had committed "green washing," or made unproven environmental claims.

"Our work suggests that most companies are trying to get their environmental claims right," he said. "That's not the same as saying they're doing this out of altruism."

Many people assume the word "compostable" on a label means the box or bag can go in a backyard composter, McDougall said. More likely, it would compost only in a hotter industrial or municipal facility.

And a typical reaction to the word "biodegradable" is, "It's OK for me to litter with this because it's going to quickly return to nature," McDougall said, but not so. Whether it's "biodegradable" trash tossed by the side of the road or "biodegradable"

trash tossed into the black bin, depending on the material and how it's treated, it could remain trash for a long, long time.

Even a conscientious company that pays a premium for takeout utensils and containers it believes are compostable is sometimes wasting money, said Alexander Helou, assistant director of L.A. Bureau of Sanitation. "In 60 to 90 days, they come out the same way they went in."

California needs to enact a labeling standard, perhaps along the lines of those numbers in triangles, for bioplastics made from plant materials, L.A. Public Works Commissioner Paula Daniels said.

"It's a wild card," she said. "You don't know what you are getting. You don't know if it will compost, or under what conditions it will."

Although Miller and others said the best solution would be for people to use less, the sustainable packaging industry is full of innovation in the materials being studied and in recycling technologies, said Anne Johnson, director of the Sustainable Packaging Coalition, an industry group.

[Starbucks Coffee](#) Co. has said it aims to make all of its cups reusable or recyclable by 2015. It estimates that in the U.S., about 58 billion paper coffee cups — 5 billion of them from Starbucks — go to landfills each year. The company has projects underway in several cities to figure out how its cups can be collected and either composted or recycled into new cups or other products.

"We know we can't solve this problem simply by purchasing cups that are labeled 'recyclable' or 'compostable,'" Jim Hanna, Starbucks director of environmental impact,

said in a statement. "We have to ensure our customers actually have access to recycling services at their homes, at work, and in our stores."

In Southern California, [Whole Foods](#) is using compostable bulrush packaging for the salad bar and packaged meat and seafood, a spokeswoman said. Last year Frito Lay introduced a compostable bag for Sun Chips but pulled it when consumers complained that it made too much noise.

There are always tradeoffs.

"There is no such thing as a perfect green product," McDougall said.

If a company brags that it's not using petroleum in its product but it slashes forests in Indonesia to grow raw materials, that's a mixed benefit, said Karl Bruskotter, an environmental analyst with the Santa Monica Office of Sustainability and the Environment.

Utensils made of cornstarch but manufactured in [China](#) might have consumers wondering about the fuel consumed in shipping. And some environmental advocates question whether food crops should be grown for nonfood purposes, taking into account subsidies and land and water use.

Miller has an office full of good and bad examples: cups marked for recycling that are not, on the one hand, and salad bar containers made from grasses on the other. One restaurant printed its menu on a paper takeout bag — a double win, she said.

This trash smells like eucalyptus

The green bins from the East Valley end up at Lopez Canyon Environmental Center, site

of a landfill from 1975 to 1996. There's little sign of that time, save for pipes along the road that will carry the methane gas produced for two or three decades to come.

In 2004, the composting facility opened. Red-tail hawks, deer, coyote and bobcats are attracted to the 18 windrows, huge piles of about 300 tons apiece, stretched along a wide open hilltop that smells like soil and eucalyptus and will turn to usable material in 50 to 90 days. The resulting mulch and compost go to farms, homes and municipal projects; some is sold to landscape companies.

Standing at the foot of a huge pile of green waste is a man with a pitchfork, the first step in the effort to take out what doesn't belong. At a picking station, more junk gets plucked out: trash bags, takeout coffee lids, a table top, a Nerf football.

Paul Blount, operations manager in the Bureau of Sanitation's Solid Resources Processing and Construction Division, speculated that some people fill their black cans and then figure they can hide extra garbage in the green or blue ones.

Plenty of mistakes show up in blue bins too.

Each day, 20 to 30 trucks carrying the contents of blue bins arrive at Bestway Recycling Co., a site near Chinatown that looks like a [Rube Goldberg](#) machine stuck in a [Tim Burton](#) movie.

The detritus of 21st century L.A. life is everywhere: a bike helmet, a cooler and a painting of a young woman as well as the glass, paper and plastic that actually do belong in blue bins.

The stuff moves over a series of outdoor

conveyor belts and bins in a big U shape. Over one belt, glass drops between the rollers, while larger, lighter things move on. In another area, cardboard gets separated. At the end, the final recyclables get pulled out by hand.

About 65% of what comes in gets recycled, said Michael Lee, an environmental engineering associate with the Bureau of Sanitation.

For Bestway, reselling what it collects is how it stays in business. Bales weighing around 1,500 pounds are shipped where they can be used, most often to China, said William Duran, Bestway's yard manager.

Ideally, trash created in California is recycled in California, but there are not yet enough companies that can use all of it, said Mark Oldfield, a spokesman for the state Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery.

What Bestway can't sell it has to bring to a landfill, at a cost of \$50 or more a ton.

Worse, people toss open cans of paint or used hypodermic needles in the bins, Duran said. It can take six months for a worker who gets stuck with a needle to be certified healthy, he said. On the other hand, he said, an employee once found a diamond ring.