IMPACT OF FOOD RESIDUE IN FOODSERVICE PACKAGING RECYCLING: 2013 STUDY OVERVIEW

The Foodservice Packaging Institute's Paper Recovery Alliance and Plastics Recovery Group have been working on overcoming barriers that potentially hinder increased recovery of foodservice packaging, and one of the often-cited reasons foodservice packaging is not accepted for recycling is the concern about increased levels of food contamination.

The Study
To address this concern, a study was conducted with the help of DSM Environmental Services, Inc. to learn whether foodservice packaging set out for recycling from selected areas in City of Boston were more contaminated than food contact packaging that has traditionally been accepted at single stream material recovery facility (MRF).

The study included a sampling of approximately 2,000 pounds of randomly selected curbside recyclables collected in four different areas of the City. For all recycling samples, corrugated, mixed paper, plastic tubs and lids, aluminum cans and foils/pans, were sorted into two categories, foodservice packaging or other packaging in contact with food. The team then used a visual ranking system to rate and record how much food residue was on the selected categories.

The Results
With the exception of corrugated containers, there was no appreciable difference in contamination rates between foodservice and food contact packaging. Even in the case of corrugated, contamination was relatively minor in most cases. The following observations are, however, necessary to place this analysis in perspective.

1. All of the recyclables were exceptionally clean when compared to the Project Team’s experience with other recycling sorts. For this reason, while the foodservice packaging is representative of the Boston areas where the study was conducted, it may not be representative of recycling set outs in other cities.

2. While the MRF will accept foodservice packaging from fast food restaurants, it is not widely known that this is the case, and is not advertised by either Boston or the MRF operator. As a consequence there were
relatively small quantities of mixed paper foodservice packaging to rank, limiting the usefulness of that comparison.

3. The most meaningful comparison associated with this sort is the plastic tubs, cups and clamshells. The sample was robust and covered a broad range of contamination levels for both food contact and foodservice packaging.

**Contractor’s Conclusions**

The study presented an ideal opportunity to obtain initial data on the issue of adding foodservice packaging to recycling programs. The ability to add foodservice packaging could make a large difference in how many commercial eating establishments manage their waste and recycling.

However, as cautioned above, it is not clear that the Boston data would be replicated in other recycling programs given how clean all of the Boston recyclables were. As such, this first attempt to compare foodservice packaging contamination with contamination of other recyclables should be viewed as just that – a first look at the issue. Certainly, given the potential to add these materials and boost recycling rates for packaging, this issue deserves additional investigation, with this analysis providing at least a promising potential.

*More information on FPI’s recovery projects may be found at [www.fpi.org/stewardship](http://www.fpi.org/stewardship).*