

Recycling Milk Containers

Fifth in a series of articles about waste reduction initiatives in the Vanderhoof area.

The Nechako Waste Reduction Initiative (NWRI), along with the Nechako Valley Food Network (NVFN), is part of the Nechako Healthy Community Alliance. Funding is provided by the Regional District of Bulkley-Nechako (RDBN), which is responsible for handling waste in our area.

Did you know that there is a wide variety of milk containers that are fully recyclable in Vanderhoof?

Who is behind the milk containers recycling program? The British Columbia Dairy Council is the trade association for the province's dairy processors – the companies that convert raw milk into finished dairy products. The recycling program is operated under contract for the BC Dairy Council by Encorp Pacific (Canada), the largest private sector product stewardship agency in B.C.

In Vanderhoof, the NVSS Bottle Depot, an Encorp Pacific depot, accepts the following containers: plastic milk jugs, polycoat (gabletop) cartons, plastic single serve cups, and aseptic cartons. Containers being returned need to be rinsed, crushed and cap less. Although caps need to be removed, they, too, are recycled.

When purchasing these products, the consumer doesn't have to pay a deposit; therefore, there's no refund made. However, there is the assurance that these plastics and cartons will be recycled instead of being wasted in our rapidly-filling landfill site.

At Encorp Pacific depots, the return rate is estimated to be just 6% for plastic milk jugs and 10% for milk cartons, but up to 85% when combined with curbside recycling (Source: M.E. Harvey & Associates, 2010).

After they are baled in Prince George and shipped to the Lower Mainland, here's what happens to the returned milk containers: (Source: M.E. Harvey & Associates, 2010).

High Density Polyethylene (HDPE) Plastic – By volume, 2 and 4 litre plastic milk jugs account for the majority of fresh milk sales. The recovered material is cleaned and processed into pellet form for resale in commodity markets. A typical use for this material is in new, non-food, containers, plastic formed products, furniture and toys.

Gable top (polycoat) & Aseptic (sterilized) Cartons – The largest component material in this type of carton is high quality paper fibre. Collected containers are shipped to paper recycling mills which extract the fibre for use in new products such as cardboard, linerboard, household tissue products and even fine writing papers. The small amount of residual polyethylene can be screened off for use in other plastic and composite materials.

Single Serve Milk Cups – The container consists of a plastic cup with a peel off foil lid. The type of plastic used in the cups requires that they be kept separate from milk jugs. The plastic is blended with other types for use in a wide variety of new plastic products.

The NWRI is researching ideas for recycling other types of plastics. For instance, a firm in Maple Ridge, Worldwide Plastic2Fuel Corp., hopes to license its technology to process more difficult types of plastics (#3 to #7) than plastic milk containers (#2) into synthetic fuels such as: diesel, crude oil, kerosene, heating oil, and others.

A recurring suggestion for increasing the recycling rate for milk containers is to charge consumers a deposit at point-of-sale. In Alberta, a deposit program for some milk containers began in June, 2009, and for all milk containers in November, 2009 (<1 litre 10¢, >1 litre 25¢). The return rate increased dramatically after the deposit program began, especially for milk cartons, with up to three times more cartons being returned. Overall, Alberta presently has the largest beverage container recycling deposit program scope in the world (Source: Meyers Norris Penny, 2010).

So, the NWRI encourages local consumers to voluntarily keep milk containers out of the landfill by returning them to the NVSS Bottle Depot. If you have questions about recycling milk containers, please call the bottle depot at 250-567-4059 and ask or drop by in person during its hours of operation: Monday, Tuesday and Friday (11 am to 5 pm) and Saturday (10 am to 5 pm)