



# FOODSERVICE PACKAGING: **THE ENVIRONMENT**

**A**ll products, by their very nature, have an environmental footprint — whether a reusable ceramic plate, a cloth napkin or a single-use cup. Extracting, harvesting, producing, distributing and eventually disposing of any product has factors that affect the planet.

During its century long history, the foodservice packaging industry has been dedicated to the environmentally responsible manufacture, distribution, use and disposal of its products. The industry devotes substantial resources toward innovative materials used to make foodservice packaging, recovery of these products, and reduction of these items found on roads and waterways.

## **MATERIAL INNOVATIONS**

Paper was the first material used in foodservice packaging. The paper plate was introduced in

the United States in 1903. Products made from aluminum and plastics followed. In addition to the traditional paper, plastics and aluminum materials, newer foodservice packaging products include bagasse (a byproduct of sugar cane production) and plastics made from plants.

The foodservice packaging industry also has developed ways to reduce its material usage. Examples include replacing virgin materials with renewable ones, such as talc or calcium carbonate; using recycled materials; and producing packaging made with less material overall.

The industry will continue to develop new packaging products from innovative materials with the environment in mind.



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**WHAT IS FOODSERVICE PACKAGING?** Foodservice packaging refers to single-use cups, containers, bags, wraps, cutlery, etc., used by restaurants and other establishments that offer prepared foods and beverages. These items, made from a variety of materials like paper, plastic and aluminum, allow foodservice operators to serve their customers in a sanitary, convenient and economical manner.

## RESOURCE RECOVERY

Today, the unfortunate reality is that the majority of foodservice packaging ends up in a landfill. Overall, foodservice packaging is a very small contributor to landfills — less than 2 percent, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's annual characterization of municipal solid waste reports. But even that small percentage amounts to a loss of valuable resources that could be recovered.

Recycling of all foodservice packaging is technically possible. The three critical partners in successful recycling are communities, material recovery facilities and end markets. However, the challenge is that acceptance of foodservice packaging varies, depending on the product and the geographic location.



**DID YOU KNOW?** Pizza boxes, paper bags and cup sleeves are the most commonly accepted foodservice packaging by recycling facilities.



**DID YOU KNOW?** FPI's Paper Recovery Alliance, Plastics Recovery Group and Foam Recycling Coalition actively are working to overcome the challenges to recycle and compost more foodservice packaging. To learn more, please check out [www.fpi.org/environmental-stewardship](http://www.fpi.org/environmental-stewardship).

There is increased demand for recycled content in new products — both within the foodservice packaging industry and beyond. Plus, the industry recognizes that these materials have value and should not be buried.

In addition to recycling, some paper and plastic foodservice packaging may be composted. Composting enhances soils, prevents erosion and reduces water usage. According to data from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, roughly one fifth of discards in a landfill are food scraps. The challenge, however, is that many of today's composting facilities are designed to accept yard debris, not food scraps or compostable packaging. According to a survey by BioCycle, only 7 percent of composters accept food scraps, and even less accept packaging. However, as the composting infrastructure grows across the nation, so will the ability to compost foodservice packaging.



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Another foodservice packaging recovery effort is in energy. Interest in waste-to-energy is on the rise, as technology advances beyond simply burning waste. While more traditional waste-to-energy facilities create electricity, there are newer technologies that produce combustible fuels, synthetic crude oil and rich synthesis gas (syngas) for fuel cells, just to name a few. Innovations in this area will continue as options are considered for those items not accepted for recycling or composting, and interest grows in alternative energy sources.



**DID YOU KNOW?** Placed in an energy recovery facility, polystyrene generates 17,800 BTUs of energy per pound, which is double the inherent energy value of coal.



**DID YOU KNOW?** The Foodservice Packaging Institute was a founding member of Keep America Beautiful.

## LITTER REDUCTION

Litter is a pervasive, nationwide problem. Admittedly, too much foodservice packaging is found on the ground and in the water. However, litter is not a packaging problem, it's a people problem. According to research conducted for Keep America Beautiful, over three-quarters of all litter is the result of a deliberate action by an individual, e.g., flicking, flinging or dropping a cigarette butt, wrapper, advertising flyer or other item. Changing consumer behavior is not easy, but it is necessary. Accidental litter can be minimized. Properly covering trash and recycling collection vehicles; securing containers, dumpsters and residential waste; and adequately placing recycling bins where litter accumulates have proven effective.



**DID YOU KNOW?** A 2009 Keep America Beautiful study found that fast food packaging (the largest component of all foodservice packaging) contributed less than 6 percent to total litter.

**Foodservice packaging is safe, sanitary, convenient and economical.  
That's why it's called "the sensible solution."**



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