

## Environment

# The Many Sins of Plastic Foam

*Coalition seeks to halt use of ozone-depleting foam packaging*

**P**LASTICS might have been a word of advice during the early '70s, but in the late '80s it's become a major ecological concern. And with the recent discovery that a huge hole is forming in the ozone layer above Antarctica, one particular type of plastic — plastic foam, commonly known as Styrofoam — has given everyone even more cause to worry.

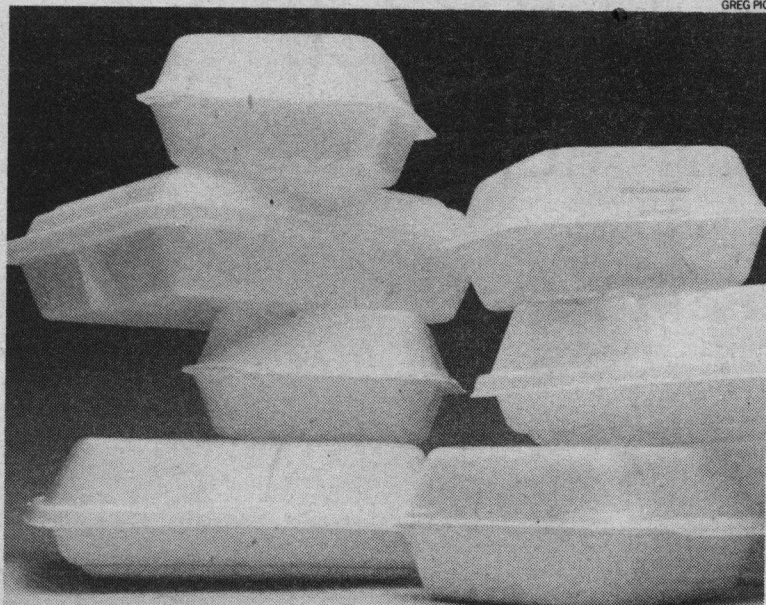
The hole, which is allowing larger-than-normal doses of cancer-causing ultraviolet radiation to enter the earth's atmosphere, has been traced to chlorofluorocarbons, which are being released into the atmosphere primarily by the manufacture of plastic foam products.

But rather than simply donning large hats, swabbing on sunscreen and wearing UV-protecting sunglasses, as Secretary of the Interior Donald Hodel suggested last summer, seven local environmental groups have formed the Plastic Alternatives Coalition and are working to rid the county of plastic foam, specifically food containers.

"Right now the focus is on Santa Cruz," said Chris Williams, director of Ecology Action and a member of the newly formed coalition. "But we're hoping to create a model system that others can use and take advantage of Santa Cruz' position as a leader in ecological issues."

The hole in the ozone layer is just one part of the problem with plastic foam, however.

"The debate's all centered around chlorofluorocarbons, which are



**Foaming out:** Local activists want to make environmentally damaging plastic foam packaging a thing of the past.

serious, but only one of the problems with Styrofoam," said Don Larkin, the local representative for CalPIRG and a coalition member. Some manufacturers have substituted pentane for chlorofluorocarbons in the production of plastic foam, which produces toxic smog.

"There's also a serious health threat with it because styrene, which is used to make it, is a carcinogen and acidic drinks like coffee or lemonade break down the Styrofoam and you're drinking it," he said.

The foam also poses a threat to wildlife, according to Greenpeace store manager and coalition member Joe (CQ) Conroy. "It gets eaten by

birds who think it's a food source and it blocks digestive systems and they die from it. It's also dangerous in the marine environment because it floats. A lot of animals have evolved over the centuries to eat things that float. They can't really make the distinction."

Plastic foam also has a number of problems generic to plastics, coalition members say. It's non-biodegradable, and creates toxic gases when burned, so it ends up taking up permanent room in landfills and creating toxic gases when burned. It's also made from a non-renewable source — petrochemicals.

"If we want to keep offshore oil rigs

from proliferating, we need to conserve these resources," Williams wrote in his organization's newsletter.

The connection to oil drilling serves to keep the price of plastic down at the taxpayer's expense, said Conroy. "The government has a great subsidy program for the creation of plastic products, it underwrites a lot of the cost for production of petroleum, for making plastic products. Right now it's cheap to make plastic, it's cheap to produce oil because of tax incentives."

The coalition is hoping to eliminate the use of plastic foam by asking consumers to demand biodegradable products.

"We really advocate people saying what they prefer," said Williams. "When I do it I find that the person says 'You know, that's the second or third comment I've heard this week. It's a funny thing, I've heard a lot about that lately.' That's what'll work."

That tack has worked well at the university. Under pressure from student groups, the food services at Cowell and Stevenson colleges agreed to a one-week trial using heavy paper plates and aluminium foil instead of plastic foam. At the end of the week, the food services surveyed as to their preference, which was overwhelmingly in favor of the alternatives. At the beginning of this quarter all the campus food services have ceased using plastic foam.

Although the coalition hasn't worked directly with elected officials,

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## Plastic Foam

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Supervisor Gary Patton has furthered local efforts to rid the county of plastic foam on his own. A few months ago, at Patton's request, the board sent letters requesting fast food businesses to switch from plastic foam to more environmentally sound food containers. In the next few weeks the county will be asking its food service to make the switch as well.

The coalition has also been talking with plastic foam trade associations, manufacturers, brokers and distribu-

tors trying to determine if there are alternatives to plastic foam products and what it would take to make those available to businesses.

Ledyard Company is one of the local plastic foam distributors contacted by the group.

"It's something that needs to be done, I agree with that 100 percent," said Ron Hayes, a buyer for the company. "We want to help any way we can, but I need help from the manufacturers besides. The word really needs to get to them that they need to come out with alternatives."

According to Conroy, calling restaurants will be the coalition's next step. "We're going to ask them to switch over and we're going to pro-

vide them with the support to do that. In other words, 'here's how you can get different products to meet your needs. Here's how cost-effective it would be, here's who you call to get the products,' that kind of thing."

Eventually, they may attempt to back up that work with legislation but "in our view, ordinances are the last step. We don't think that will be necessary if consumer preference is well-enough known. We'd rather let the free market decide the change. It's such a common sense issue, it seems ludicrous to mount a big petition campaign," said Williams. "We're hoping, instead, for a smooth transition to other products."

—Chela Zabin