

# Santa Cruz/Monterey

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## Polystyrene foam banned by supervisors

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A voluntary program to eliminate use of polystyrene foam in the restaurant industry has flopped, Santa Cruz County supervisors decided Tuesday. Supervisors voted to ban the packaging material as of the first of next year.

The vote came after supervisors considered a report on the voluntary program, which took effect in unincorporated portions of the county just over a year ago.

Planning Director Dianne Guzman said a check of restaurants indicated that 53

percent of them still use the foam material in one form or another, much of it in cups, trays and "clamshell" sandwich containers.

She told supervisors that, in general, "The local food service industry has been very cooperative and responsive in implementing" the voluntary ban. But, Guzman said, the 53 percent compliance with the voluntary program does not meet the goal of eliminating use of polystyrene foam.

In her report, Guzman said two major reasons that restaurant operators gave for failing to comply with the voluntary ban

were cost and unfamiliarity with the program.

"One other noteworthy reason for non-compliance is that retailers received misinformation that a particular type of (polystyrene foam) was acceptable because it was biodegradable plastic," she reported. "Plastic, of course, is not biodegradable. Only the cornstarch binders decompose in biodegradable plastic. The plastic remains in tiny pieces."

How about recycling polystyrene foam?

Victor Aguiar, of Ecology Action, told supervisors that recycling polystyrene

posed a host of problems, chief among them the logistics of transporting the used foam to recycling centers.

Aguiar noted that Palo Alto, which had planned to ban the plastic food packaging as of July 1, has decided instead to promote recycling of polystyrene foam. He said Palo Alto officials made that decision after determining that changing to paper food packaging would still create a solid-waste problem for public landfills.

Aguiar said Palo Alto officials "believe (polystyrene foam) can be recycled and relieve stress on landfills."

But Aguiar urged supervisors to ban the foam, telling them:

"A mandatory ban is needed. The voluntary ban has clearly not been effective. Consider the future."

While paper products might still end up going to dumps, he said, composting will eventually allow recycling of food packaging.

The county counsel was asked to report back in three weeks on what, if any fines, will be levied for non-compliance with the ban.