

Local

Supervisors ban polystyrene foam food packaging

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After a year of a "voluntary ban" on polystyrene foam food packaging, Santa Cruz County supervisors are making it mandatory.

Yesterday, the board voted unanimously to ban the containers, commonly used for fast foods and packaged meat, beginning Jan. 1.

The board's action will be in effect in the unincorporated areas of the county.

The cities of Capitola and Santa Cruz adopted voluntary compliance laws last year; no studies have been done in those cities to determine how well the programs are working. The other two cities in the county, Scotts Valley and Watsonville, do not ban polystyrene foam.

Polystyrene foam has long been a target of environmental groups because it is not biodegradable.

The issue has come up before the supervisors several times, and last year the board asked for voluntary compliance from restaurants and stores that had been using the foam. Grocery stores often use foam trays for packaged meats.

A recent study by the county Planning Department showed 47 percent of restaurants and stores surveyed were complying with the voluntary ban.

Although that figure is far from the 100 percent compliance the county would like, supervisors were impressed with the voluntary effort.

"I'd like to thank the food service industry," said Supervisor Sherry Mehl; Supervisor Gary Patton was also congratulatory.

A report from Planning Director Dianne Guzman said the "positive assistance of the Santa Cruz Restaurant Association ... made a difference in this regard."

The Planning Department and a non-profit group called Ecology Action worked with the Restaurant Association to get the word out to the restaurants. Ecology Action worked under a contract with the county.

Instead of polystyrene foam, restaurants and stores were urged to use paper and cardboard packaging.

Victor Aguiar, of Ecology Action, told the board that polystyrene foam can be recycled, but there are some problems in doing it.

Because of the possible contamination, the law prohibits recycling of polystyrene foam (or paper) used in food packaging.

Although the paper can't be recycled, it doesn't take up as much room in dumps as the foam, Patton said. Recycling the foam isn't practical because "there just aren't that many products" it can be used for, Patton said.

Dan De Grassi, the planning staff member who worked with Ecology Action and the Restaurant Association, said that within the last year, alternative products for virtually every use of polystyrene foam packaging have become available.

The survey of stores and restaurants said locally owned business owners were more likely to comply with the ban than the chain restaurants. Of the 30 chain food-service retailers in the unincorporated area, 24 still use polystyrene foam, the survey said, "mostly in line with their corporate packaging policy."

The new law does not specify fines for non-compliance, but the county would be able to seek a court order forcing a violator of the law to stop using polystyrene foam.

Yesterday's approval was a first reading of the ordinance; it comes back for final approval Oct. 10.