

Transcript: Green Leek: Recycling at UNCG – Plastics

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Beth: Alright, well, let me just ask a couple of questions. These were

generated from the library, Jackson Library staff. we asked them what

questions they might have related to recycling. And it does seem like a

number of them have to do with plastics. Um, for example, is there anywhere on

campus or in Greensboro that takes the number 5 plastics, like yogurt containers,

um, and asking questions about rigid plastics. Um, and then again about

recycling, like taking the caps off when you throw those away, as well as,

other things like, um, number 1 and 2 plastics go in regular recycling at

home and here. Um, what about the 4s and 5s? So it seems like there is a lot of

questions related to the different kinds of plastics and recycling those, and the

shapes of plastics. Maybe you could talk about that a little bit.

Ben: Yeah, the bulk of the plastics that we recycle here on campus are with our

commingled recycling program. Commingled recycling is the bread and butter of our

recycling program. That's where most of our tons are, and basically our program

is a mirror of the City of Greensboro's recycling program. So if you live here

in the city of Greensboro we have the

exact same facility that we drop our

stuff off to. It's actually a cost neutral agreement we have with them, so that's

where we get a lot of our avoided cost, is not paying a tipping fee for that.

But going into plastics, um, just to back up a little bit, every recycling

operation is a little different across the country. Some people are from up

north where they can take all different kinds of plastics, 1-7. It all depends

on the market. Um, the market dictates what that recycling facility can accept.

Well, yogurt tubs are the number one thing that the OWRR gets questions on,

It's sad news, the facility that takes our commingled recycling does not accept

yogurt tubs. One of the things that we used to say is we say numbers/types 1 and 2

and you always look on the bottom and you see the number. They're moving away from that.

We are no longer saying types 1 and 2; we're saying plastic containers that the

neck of the bottle is smaller than the base of the bottle, than the body of the bottle.

So, plastics are confusing. Another one that's confusing that we see a lot of on campus is

these take-out trays. A lot of them have the number 1 on them, for clarification, again,

we're not going by the 1 and 2 system anymore. It's, again, the plastic container has to have

the neck smaller than the body. So this is a 'No.' So all these are 'No Goes' for our

commingled program at UNCG.

Beth: But that one has the neck smaller than

the body, that little yogurt container.

Ben: That is a good observation. I do know

they don't want, that they specifically say on their acceptable program, uh, item list, that

yogurt tubs are not acceptable, along with margarine containers, and plastic bags.

They specifically say 'yogurt, margarine tubs, and plastic bags' as 'Noes.' It's my job at

the university to tell you what they want to accept. Talking with the city, a lot of people

ask me: 'Why don't they accept them?,' and the short answer is, is, markets. The facility only

wants to take materials that they feel like they have the marketing advantage to make

profit on, and not to say that there's not anybody in the area that could recycle

these, but our commingled program, we have to go by what they want to accept. So, it's

my job to tell you what they want to accept. Our commingled program mirrors the City of

Greensboro's program. So it's again based on markets. I would love to tell everybody that

we could recycle all those and our numbers would skyrocket if we could, but, um, my job

here on campus is to give, is to give these facilities the correct materials, um, so we

can continue to enjoy that cost-neutral relationship with the City of Greensboro.

Um, rigid plastics is another kind of ambiguous, um, thing that the City of

Greensboro does collect, and what I like to think of as rigid plastics are, like, those

little toys that you see on playgrounds that are all those solid colored plastics.

Laundry basics, the 5-gallon buckets, um, those little nursery tray containers,

those black containers that, um, hold multiple flowers or herbs. Those containers are

rigid plastics. Um, and the City of Greensboro does have a website that goes into greater detail

about what exactly is a rigid plastic. But is it, plastics are our most confusing

item here to recycle on campus. Um, so when in doubt call and find out, um, call my

office if you have a question, um, it is, there's a lot of different plastics

out there, and, um, a lot of people enjoy lots of products packaged in plastic.

And I will say, too, about the bottle caps, um, bottle caps, we do encourage

people to take off caps, and remove them and put them in the trash. And we do

encourage people to rinse out the containers, and empty to contents of

those beverage containers. Um, it's not the end of the world if the cap is left

on, or there's a little bit of Coke or water left in that bottle. Um, they can

still recycle it. It won't contaminate the entire load, and force the whole

load to be trashed. But that is the ideal, um, is to remove the caps.

One of the main reasons they want us to do that, is when plastic is then

separated out at the facility, it's condensed into a big cube. And when

you condense those plastic bottles with caps on, it's like a shotgun going off.

The air pressure shoots that cap off, so it's a safety issue, and a lot of times

those caps are made of a different kind

of plastic. So, um, in marketing recyclables

you want to have a nice homogenous, um, collection of whatever it is, in

this case plastic, and when you start introducing different kinds of plastics

that value of that bale goes down. So they're trying to maximize the value,

and when you maximize the value you maximize the recyclability of that item.