



CALLING ALL CARTONS

In April 2009, four leading carton manufacturers – Tetra Pak inc., Evergreen Packaging, SIG Combibloc and Elopak – joined forces and created the carton council to expand U.S. carton recycling access and infrastructure. In this follow-up to a may 2010 story, we check in to see the council’s progress since then and get an overview of how it all came together.

BY BETSY DORN

Regardless of one’s position on the debate over extended producer responsibility legislation, it’s difficult to argue the success of the Carton Council. One mill, one sorting facility and one community at a time, the Council’s aggressive voluntary producer responsibility campaign has delivered results.

Midway through its second year, the Council has made significant advances toward expanding U.S. recycling access and infrastructure for post-consumer poly-coated cartons. Some of the year-two highlights:

- Doubled the number of U.S. households with carton recycling access to 35.6 percent in 2011 from 18 percent in 2008, with a 15 percent surge in the last eight months alone.
- Expanded the number of mills accepting post-consumer poly-coated cartons to nine – up from one – in less than two years, with more facilities expected online in the next 18 months.
- Increased the number of materials recovery facilities (MRFs) to

37, which are either under or finalizing a contract to accept and sort cartons for marketing as a distinct grade.

- Secured communities in 39 states that now include cartons in recycling programs.

How it happened

The carton recycling initiative’s success has resulted from a carefully planned and orchestrated series of steps and a commitment of substantial funding from Carton Council member firms. Through these efforts, the council now makes it easy for MRFs, haulers and communities to launch and sustain carton recycling programs and infrastructure through a focused, proven strategy.

By 2015, it is projected that 50 percent of U.S. households will have access to carton recycling. What follows are highlights of how the Council expanded carton recycling access, for the purpose of improving the health and prosperity of people and planet by diverting

cartons from landfills and by reusing base carton materials to produce new high-value products.

Begin with the right questions

in mind. In 2008, prior to the Carton Council's existence, founding member Tetra Pak embarked upon a study of options to aggressively expand carton recycling. Key questions shaped the nature of this investigation: Could gable-top and aseptic cartons be managed separately or would these need to be managed collectively? Should cartons be recovered and processed as a component of mixed paper? What barriers must be overcome to divert cartons from the waste stream? And most importantly, what is the highest value and best use of recovered cartons?

Enlist the help of experts. To answer these questions and build understanding of solutions needed to achieve its recycling goals, the Carton Council sought the input, advice and counsel of industry experts in recycling logistics, markets and infrastructure campaign development.

Form alliances. To gain better clarity on the technical and economical implications of carton recycling, the Carton Council tapped into industry knowledge by working closely with sorters and processors, as well as third parties like RRS (Resource Recycling Systems) to develop and execute the campaign. Working across the supply chain and with all the different stakeholders provided valuable insight, built organizational capacity and helped accelerate the pace of increasing carton recycling access.

Select a program champion. In developing and implementing the solution to expand access to carton recycling, the Carton Council leveraged Jeffrey Fielkow as its lead recycling expert. His keen insights and understanding of the recycling industry and the recycling marketplace set the foundation for building a solution. His capacity to engage specific areas of recycling industry expertise added significantly to developing the success formula and building the dedicated team of experts to execute.

Build the pipeline, fill the pipeline.

The Carton Council supplied the resources (financial, corporate mandate, legal and technical support) to conduct detailed feasibility assessments, which produced a thorough understanding of the underlying gaps in recycling infrastructure. Starting in the Northeastern U.S., this methodical process drilled down to the granular level of the recycling systems material selection process and the criteria used by end markets.

Sidebar 1: Los Angeles case study

With increasing frequency, strong community interest has been able to drive the addition of cartons to area recycling programs. The recent announcement of the inclusion of cartons to the City of Los Angeles recycling program is a good example of how the Carton Council works.

In this case, the Council acted as a facilitator to help the city achieve its goal to add carton recycling to its curbside programs. The Carton Council's field team collaborated with the city in conjunction with its recycling processors to ensure cartons would be marketable as a recyclable commodity – a key step in getting cartons added to the city's recycling program.

"Los Angeles continues striving toward being the greenest city in the nation. That is why the City of Los Angeles has partnered with the Carton Council to make sure that liquid food and beverage cartons are not left to the landfills but are recycled in the most

responsible and efficient way possible," said Mayor Antonio R. Villaraigosa. "Successful collaborations, initiatives and public-private partnerships have made Los Angeles a national leader in environmental stewardship and this program is another step in the right direction."

"Our city has a long-term goal of achieving zero waste, so we want to create and take advantage of all the opportunities available to recycle more items, such as cartons, and to continue to increase the number of recyclable materials that can be saved from land filling," he added.

Success markers within the city's campaign "On the Road to Zero Waste" include carton recycling. The Bureau of Sanitation is now diverting and recycling 65 percent of the city's 10.1 million tons of solid waste each year – more than any big city in the nation. The city's goal is to achieve a 70 percent diversion rate from landfill by 2013.

MRF operators, solid waste and recycling haulers, and governmental agencies all were included.

The Council's core strategy centered on building sustainable end markets, building sustainable processing infrastructure, bringing communities online that accept cartons for recycling, and – only then – developing consumer awareness and participation in carton recycling.

Based on this groundwork, the Council determined it must engage in a proactive industry partnership driven by voluntary producer responsibility for used food and beverage cartons in U.S. markets. As a result, U.S. households would gain access to carton recycling through this partnership:

- Pushing carton-friendly financial and technical resources into the supply chain to engage those recycling professionals and their mills and sorting facilities in the partnerships needed to build the carton recycling supply chain;
- Supporting end-market and sorting-facility capital upgrades, helping those facilities quickly adopt the equipment changes needed to successfully incorporate cartons into recycling systems;
- Providing marketplace assistance for guaranteed movement of cartons – supporting the inherent commodity value

of the high-quality fiber contained in cartons – and building the marketplace pricing needed for sustainable recycling;

- Building community, hauler and school support for carton recycling access by providing technical assistance and communications support once carton recycling infrastructure is in place.

Stay true to core values. The collaborative partnership of Carton Council members is the heart of the carton recycling access campaign. The membership was initially limited in order to build team capacity for decision-making and overall shared commitment. Initial partners were restricted to carton manufacturers and their paperboard suppliers, which include Elopak, Evergreen Packaging, SIG Combibloc, Tetra Pak and paperboard supplier Weyerhaeuser. Consumer brands, however, have not been invited in as members, but are actively engaged in updates on the campaign.

As the campaign has gained attention, there has been increased interest from other packaging types, especially those that use similar types of polycoated paperboard. More specifically, the Council has been in active discussions with makers of polycoated ice cream cartons, cups, freezer board and oven-board as potential allies in this

Figure 1 | Carton recycling supply chain



Source:

campaign to move these currently non-recycled items into the recycling system. The Council, however, requires certain levels of organizational, financial and strategic commitment from current members and would require the same commitment from potential partners. The Council looks forward to when the timing is right to expand the model to include other packaging types.

Work toward continuous improvement. The Carton Council philosophy has been to identify gaps and then address those gaps with incentives and support – sustained by the market pull of cartons as a recyclable commodity. This is part of an ongoing commitment to a robust and flexible

strategy that has a continuous improvement focus, calibrating and re-calibrating as necessary to achieve targeted results. Over the course of this campaign numerous adjustments have been made to reach the point of the Council's current offer.

The Council provides market guarantees for post-consumer cartons, including guaranteed movement of cartons, partial load shipment of carton bales (for smaller operators), floor price support for carton markets (value negotiated with each sorting facility), and broker services that provide direct linkages to both domestic and export markets for post-consumer cartons. The Council actually funds the floor price supports with an escrow account as part of its guarantee to sorting facilities.

New PSI Spec Grade 52 – Aseptic/Gable Top Cartons

- Consists of liquid packing board containers including empty, used PE coated, printed one-side aseptic and gable-top cartons containing no less than 70 percent bleached chemical fiber and may contain up to 6 percent aluminum foil and 24 percent PE film/
- Prohibitive materials may not exceed 2 percent.
- Total out-throws may not exceed 5 percent.

What's next

The Carton Council's long-term U.S. strategy to build sustainable recycling infrastructure for cartons is well underway. It has demonstrated outstanding early results and is strongly positioned to achieve its goals for sustainable household carton recycling access, leading eventually to higher diversion of cartons from disposal through recycling.

As the campaign has expanded nationwide, awareness has increased at both the professional and consumer level. It has generated more inquiries and more opportu-

End-of-life carton recycling

Preferred for highest yield:

- Whole carton recycling into building products
- Positive sort of carton into tissue/pulp with poly/al recovery
Both reach 90 to 100 percent of carton recovery (fiber and poly/al)

Preferred for high yield:

- Positive sort of carton into tissue – no poly/al recovery
Yields 90 percent of fiber recovery, 70 percent total recovery

Least preferred, but acceptable:

- With mixed paper into domestic or export (tissue/pulp)
Recovery depends on pulping time/temp – 50-60 percent total

Unacceptable:

- Disposal

nities to develop access from self-identified carton recycling volunteers.

Moving forward, the campaign will target goals to accelerate efforts to search for and find the organic carton recycling access opportunities, refine the focus and tactical effectiveness to generate leads and new access gains, and continue to expand team capacity to meet demand. **RR**

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For more information, follow the Carton Council online at RecycleCartons.com and Twitter @recyclecartons for updates on what's being done to advance carton recycling for consumers, communities, processors and haulers.

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