Plastics Environmental Context

U.S. Context

Within the United States (U.S.)--the largest consumer market in the world--plastic consumption has an incredible footprint, with plastic bottles and jars representing about 75 percent of all plastic containers, by weight.1 These plastic containers are almost exclusively composed of non-recycled petrochemicals. The Container Recycling Institute reports that even the newly-designed PET bottles in the U.S. contain only 7% recycled content.2

Looking forward, major beverage manufacturers have promised to integrate larger quantities of recycled materials in their bottles. PepsiCo is targeting 25% in all its plastic packaging by 2025, and Nestle Waters vows to reach 35% globally and 50% in the U.S. by 2025.3 In 2019, Coca-Cola launched a hybrid Dasani bottle that features up to 50% recycled plastic and renewable, plant-based materials, and committed to shifting its other bottles and cans towards 50% recycled content over the next 11 years.4 The petrochemical content of these water bottles is especially significant because within the U.S., bottled water sales currently outpace bottled soft drink sales.5 Though reusable water bottles have become trendy, as exemplified through the introduction of a diamond-studded water bottle from SWELL, consumption rates of bottled water are higher than ever before.6 Each year, the average American consumes 167 bottles of water with only 30% of these making their way to recycling plants.7

The disposal end of the U.S. SPB consumption cycle is in dire straits and completely ill-equipped to handle even the volume of plastic which is successfully recycled. Prior to closing its doors, in 2016 China had imported two-thirds of the world’s

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3 Ibid.
5 https://myequa.com/blogs/blog/89626311-facts-about-plastic-bottles
plastic waste, with 693 million metric tons coming from the U.S. alone.\(^8\) Now, with their major former purchaser declining to take American plastic waste, local governments and recycling companies across the US are faced with a lack of affordable options.\(^9\) Because the US lacks the recycling infrastructure to efficiently handle the volume of plastic waste produced daily across the country, localities and waste companies have turned to landfills or incineration as cheaper solutions to the issue.\(^10\)

Some consumers and activist organizations call for a larger burden of the recycling problem to be borne by the companies manufacturing the SPBs. Mike Murray, executive director of California Against Waste, calls for manufacturers to increase prices, if necessary, to account for the cost of properly recycling their beverages. He explains, “If a company chooses to sell me water in a single-serving container, I should have to pay the full cost of delivering that water in a single-serving container, which includes recovering that container as waste. These voluntary efforts are nice. But the key is getting the pricing right.”\(^11\)

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\(^8\)https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2018/06/28/623972937/china-has-refused-to-recycle-the-west-s-plastics-what-now
\(^9\)https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2019/03/china-has-stopped-accepting-our-trash/584131/