

Why Support a Take-Out Food Container Ordinance?

It makes sense. We should avoid take-out food containers made of Expanded Polystyrene (EPS) foam because they are either destined to become trash or persist in our environment indefinitely as litter. There are affordable, reusable, recyclable, and biodegradable alternatives that have less impact on the environment.

It increases recycling. Currently, expanded polystyrene (EPS) foam containers cannot be economically recycled here in Maine. Requiring that take-out containers instead be made of materials that are able to be recycled locally will boost recycling rates.

It helps stop litter and protect wildlife. Almost 90 percent of floating marine litter has been estimated to be plastic or polystyrene items. The lightweight nature of expanded polystyrene foam makes it easy to travel through gutters, storm drains and wind to reach the ocean. When this material enters the ocean it may break into tiny pieces, but it never fully degrades and will persist forever. Plastic also has the unique ability to soak up chemicals that it comes in contact with—making the debris potentially toxic to fish and birds that mistake them for food.

It reduces waste. The full “life cycle” of expanded polystyrene foam is second only to aluminum in terms of total environmental impacts—considering manufacturing, use and disposal, energy consumption, and greenhouse gas emissions. The polystyrene manufacturing process releases significant air pollution and large amounts of solid waste.

Alternatives are available, and being used. Given the detrimental effects associated with EPS food containers, restaurants themselves are beginning to voluntarily swap them out for alternative products. For instance, McDonald's quit using expanded polystyrene clamshell containers in 1990 and in 2013 they announced that they are phasing out the foam cups at its 14,000 US restaurants in favor of paper cups by 2016.

Take-out food container ordinances work. Dozens of cities have enacted EPS container bans in the US, including San Francisco; Seattle; Portland, OR; Amherst, MA; New York City, and Freeport, ME. Portland, Maine's ordinance goes into effect April 15, 2015. Also, the State of Maine has banned the use of EPS food containers at all facilities and functions. One year after implementation of the San Francisco ordinance that prohibits the use of EPS food containers, their litter audit showed a 36% decrease in EPS litter.