

McDonald's Testing Eco-Friendlier Coffee Cups

By Miguel Llanos, msnbc.com

Call it a potentially small step for mankind but a potentially giant one for McDonald's: Some 2,000 of its restaurants, 15 percent of all those in the U.S., are testing the idea of replacing polystyrene hot cups with more easily recyclable paper ones.

"The objective of this test is to assess customer acceptance, operational impact and overall performance," McDonald's USA spokeswoman Ashlee Yingling told msnbc.com.

Word of the test was first revealed earlier Wednesday by the activist group **As You Sow**, which at the last McDonald's shareholders meeting submitted a proposal to assess beverage container impacts and develop packaging recycling goals.

The vote didn't pass, but McDonald's recently notified **As You Sow** of its prototype paper cups, which are "double hulled" to prevent burned fingers.

"This is a great first step for McDonald's and we hope it will lead to a permanent switch to paper cups in all of its restaurants," Conrad MacKerron, **As You Sow's** senior program director, said in a statement. "Given the company's history of using high levels of recycled content in other food packaging, we hope that it follows suit with its cups, and also establishes a robust recycling program for post-consumer waste left in its restaurants."

MacKerron told msnbc.com that it shouldn't be difficult to switch to paper cups, given that even coffee giant Starbucks uses them. "Our main goal," he added, is to get McDonald's "to recycle in-store cups."

"There should be no trouble recycling them," MacKerron said when asked if used, moist cups can be ingested by the recycling industry. "Starbucks did tests in 2010 indicating cups can be recycled and is already recycling their own cups in many locations."

Indeed, Starbucks called the results an "important milestone" in its push to ensure all of its cups are reusable or recyclable by 2015.

Composting paper cups is one recycling path, but MacKerron said that's "less preferred environmentally as composting releases greenhouse gases" believed to contribute to global warming. Those gases "would stay embedded if paper was recycled into new cups or other paper products," he adds. "Also, from a material efficiency standpoint, better to reuse the paper than cut down more trees."

Polystyrene products are not commonly recycled. Moreover, styrene, which is used to make polystyrene, has been found by the National Institutes of Health to be a likely carcinogen that can increase the risk of cancer for workers in that industry.

As You Sow noted that McDonald's has made changes in other areas, for example, phasing out foam-based food containers in 1990.

"Over the next decade, McDonald's eliminated more than 300 million pounds of packaging and reduced restaurant



As You Sow

The paper cups being tested by McDonald's, seen here, look a lot like existing polystyrene cups and have are "double walled" to avoid burned fingers.

waste by 30 percent, saving an estimated \$6 million per year," **As You Sow** stated. "However, the company continued to use billions of foam-based beverage cups."

McDonald's said most of the testing is being done at restaurants on the West Coast.

The company doesn't have any customer feedback to report just yet, Yingling said, but the test reflects McDonald's efforts "to seek more environmentally sustainable solutions."

The company does issue an annual sustainability report, and has pledged to source all its food and packaging from sustainable sources over time.

For example, McDonald's says all fish for its fish sandwiches is wild caught, and that 100 percent is sourced from fisheries certified by the Marine Stewardship Council.

Last month, and after a campaign by The Humane Society of the United States, McDonald's said it will require that its U.S. pork suppliers phase out the use of confined stalls for pregnant pigs.

As for the polystyrene cups, Yingling emphasized that no set date has been set for any phase-out.

"At this time, this is only a test," she added. "Future plans have not been determined."