

McDonald's Agrees to Phase Out Polystyrene Cups

Jennifer Elks | Sep. 25, 2013

McDonald's Corp. has confirmed that it will replace all polystyrene beverage cups with paper cups at its 14,000 U.S. outlets, according to **As You Sow (AYS)**, a nonprofit organization that promotes corporate responsibility through shareholder advocacy. The move comes in response to a shareholder proposal filed by **AYS** in 2011, asking the fast-food giant to stop using foam.



After agreeing to a test replacement of its foam cups with a double-walled paper hot cup at approximately 2,000 restaurants, primarily on the West Coast, in 2012, McDonald's deemed the pilots successful and the paper cup will now become the standard hot beverage cup at all U.S. outlets.

"We congratulate McDonald's on its decision to stop using foam beverage cups, which will reduce the threat of plastic pollution to the world's oceans and provide a more recyclable, valuable alternative in paper fiber," said **AYS** SVP Conrad MacKerron.

Polystyrene is not widely recycled and has become pervasive in the marine environment, carried through storm drains to the ocean. It breaks down into small indigestible pellets that birds and marine mammals often fatally mistake for food. Scores of cities in California have banned or restricted the use of polystyrene food packaging and Mayor Bloomberg has proposed a ban on foam in New York City.

McDonald's began to phase out its iconic clamshell foam hamburger box in 1990 amid controversy about the environmental impacts of polystyrene, but continued to use foam beverage cups.

"McDonald's has made a great start by phasing out foam," MacKerron said. "We hope they will also incorporate recycled fiber in the cups and develop on-site systems to collect and recycle food-service packaging." McDonald's is already a major purchaser of recycled fiber used in its food containers, bags, and napkins.

As You Sow is also in dialogue with Dunkin' Donuts, which uses foam hot beverage cups. The company recently announced plans to phase out foam cups in two to three years but has not disclosed what materials it will use instead.

There are also occupational risks associated with styrene, which is used to make polystyrene. The International Agency for Research on Cancer has determined that styrene is a possible human carcinogen and it has been listed as a possible carcinogen by the National Institutes of Health's National Toxicology Program.

Last month, the Center for Environmental Health filed suit in California against four companies that sell shampoos, soaps and other personal care products that contain cocamide diethanolamine (cocamide DEA), a chemically modified form of coconut oil used as a thickener or foaming agent in many products, which was listed by California as a known carcinogen last year.

In other shareholder resolution news, **AYS** approached General Mills at its annual shareholder meeting earlier this week, asking the company to take responsibility for recycling its post-consumer packaging waste.