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McDonald's brings foam cups back to Chicago despite shareholder pressure

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Some local [McDonald's](#) restaurants are throwing it back to the old days — not with a new menu item, but with plastic foam cups.

McDonald's says some Chicago-area restaurants are using foam cups instead of more environmentally friendly options this summer for large drinks despite pressure from shareholders to phase foam out for good.

The world's largest burger chain previously only used foam cups for iced tea year-round in the U.S., spokeswoman Becca Hary said. She declined to say why it brought the cups back to Chicago or if they were brought back in other cities too.

"This summer, Chicago-area restaurants may be using a large Styrofoam cup to serve their customers select cold beverages," Hary said in a statement. "We continue to work with our suppliers on sustainable packaging options that reduce our sourcing footprint and positively impact the communities we serve."

Plastic foam, also known as polystyrene, doesn't biodegrade like paper and isn't as easily recyclable as other plastics, but it's still used widely in the food service industry because it's inexpensive and preferred by some customers because it keeps beverages cold longer and doesn't "sweat," or produce condensation on the outside of the cup.

McDonald's phased out the use of polystyrene in its hot beverage cups in 2013 and stopped using foam sandwich containers in 1990. Both moves were made amid significant public pressure. The material has been banned in some U.S. cities due to its environmental impact.

Oak Brook-based McDonald's has never made a promise to completely phase out the use of polystyrene, and the company has said polystyrene represents only a fraction of its packaging worldwide. It's also far from the only restaurant chain to keep the material around. [Dunkin' Donuts](#) still uses polystyrene cups

despite years of promises to find a better alternative, and other fast-food chains, such as **Chick-fil-A**, use polystyrene cups for beverages of all sizes.

In May, McDonald's recommended its shareholders vote against a proposal that would have required the burger giant to assess the environmental impacts of its foam beverage cups. But that proposal won 32 percent of the shareholder vote, a rare level of support for a proposal brought by outsiders.

"It seems strange to bring something like this back," said **Conrad MacKerron**, senior vice president of **As You Sow**, a corporate responsibility group that has pushed for a phaseout of polystyrene at McDonald's and other restaurant chains and retailers. "It's kind of curious that they're doing this now."

MacKerron said that McDonald's has in the past shown resistance to shareholder efforts and then complied months later "when the noise dies down."

"My expectation is that it's still the same pattern they'll operate in here: wait a few months and make an announcement" phasing out polystyrene cold beverage cups, he said.

McDonald's long-term goal is to derive all of its packaging from certified or recycled sources by 2020.

"For a company of McDonald's size and scope, that's a pretty tall order," Rolf Huwyler, McDonald's senior manager for global sustainability, said last year as the chain rolled out new bags, sandwich boxes and cups. "And to be sure, there have been — and will continue to be — challenges along the way."

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