

## Background

The Foodservice Packaging Institute commissioned two studies to gain insight into the state of foodservice packaging recycling in California.

The first study, *Foodservice Packaging Recycling in California MRFs (2016)*, prepared by Moore Recycling Associates Inc., surveyed material recovery facilities (MRFs) in California to learn which foodservice packaging items were accepted, how the materials are handled and processed, and any concerns the MRFs had about accepting the materials. The study surveyed 85 MRFs operating across California, and the 70 MRFs which responded represented over 80 percent of the recycling volume processed in the state. The MRFs were also asked if they sorted or disposed of the items, regardless of whether they officially accepted them, and which type of commodity bale they were sorted into. Foodservice packaging items included in the survey are shown below:

| Categories | Foodservice Packaging Items  |
|------------|--|
| Paper      | <i>Cups; Take-out containers; Pizza boxes; Molded fiber items</i>        |
| Plastic    | <i>Rigid clamshells and cups; Rigid utensils; Foam foodservice items</i> |
| Metal      | <i>Aluminum foil containers and trays</i>                                |

The second study, *Availability of Recycling for Foodservice Packaging in the State of California (2016)*, conducted by Resource Recycling Systems (RRS), reviewed residential recycling guides to assess the availability of programs in California that accept various foodservice packaging items. The study reviewed the single-family, curbside recycling guidelines of every community over 7,200 residents in California, representing 90 percent of the state's population. The study also included a select number of random smaller communities to extrapolate to the remaining non-surveyed communities and generate a statewide estimate of recycling availability. The communities' guidelines were rated on how they described their acceptance of each material in their program. Foodservice packaging items included in the study are shown below:

| Categories | Foodservice Packaging Items   |
|------------|---|
| Paper      | <i>Cups; Take-out clamshells/containers/trays; Molded fiber food packaging (service ware/carriers/containers/egg cartons)</i>   |
| Plastic    | <i>PET: Clamshells; Containers/trays; Cups; Lids<br/>PP: Clamshells; Tubs/containers/trays; Cups; Cutlery; Lids<br/>PS: Clamshells; Containers; Cups; Cutlery; Lids<br/>Foam PS: Clamshells; Trays/containers; Cups</i> |
| Metal      | <i>Aluminum foil food packaging (containers/pans/trays)</i>   |

## Results

The results of the two studies found disparities between the acceptance of materials by MRFs and acceptance in residential programs.

- **Rigid plastic cups and containers** were accepted by nearly three-quarters of the responding MRFs. However, the Availability of Recycling survey, which used a more detailed material survey list, found variances in the availability of recycling rates ranging from roughly 70 percent for PS cups to 90 percent for PET clamshells.
- **Foam cups and containers** were accepted by less than 20 percent of MRFs with nearly one quarter of residential programs accepting these foam items.
- **Paper cups and take-out containers** were accepted by over half of the MRFs but the acceptance of these materials in residential programs was far lower.
- Over 80 percent of MRFs accepted **molded fiber food packaging**, but the residential program availability rate was about half of that.
- **Aluminum foil containers** had the highest acceptance rate at MRFs with over 90 percent accepting the material. However, residential program availability was much lower, with only about half of the population served by programs accepting these materials.

## Conclusions

Based on these two studies in California, the acceptance of foodservice packaging in MRFs is not always reflected in residential recycling guides. Comparing the studies, it appears that MRFs often accept, process and sort a broader range of foodservice packaging items than are listed as acceptable in residential recycling guides.

These studies add valuable insight into the availability of foodservice packaging recycling for different items and how MRFs treat and handle the packaging when it enters facilities. Taken together, they suggest an opportunity to increase recovery of foodservice packaging by working to align residential recycling guides with the foodservice packaging items accepted by the corresponding MRFs.