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Sorting plastic raises U recycling expenses

The University's recycling facility was designed for cans, meaning plastic must be sorted by hand.

By Patricia Drey

A pile in the corner of the University's Como Recycling Facility shows that more plastic means more work for University recyclers.

The University recycled approximately two tons of plastic in 1995 and now recycles more than 40 tons, said Dana Donatucci, program director for waste abatement services.

Because the University's system was designed to sort cans, the increase now means working Saturdays and possibly investing in new machinery, he said.

Donatucci said if the University's contract for Coca-Cola products is renewed in 2006, he hopes it might include company funding for new sorting equipment.

Myron McKenzie, a recycling facility utility worker, said he now spends more time sorting.

"I'd rather have aluminum cans," McKenzie said. "The machine takes care of those."

Plastics have to be separated from cans by hand.

"Any time somebody touches something, it costs more," said Paul Gardner, executive director for the Recycling Association of Minnesota. "If someone has to

pick up a bottle and shoot it off the conveyor belt and put it in a certain bin, there's a cost to that."

Contracts with soft drink companies often do not mention recycling costs, Gardner said.

"The problem is when large customers like a university or a school district, or anybody for that matter, negotiate with a soft drink company they often don't think about the consequences of the contract on the recycling end," Gardner said.

Though the University's Coke contract does not contain specific recycling requirements, Coke representatives have been open to discussions about recycling, Leslie Bowman, director of University Dining Services' contract administration, said.

"I think they want to be good partners," Bowman said.

When the University's soft drink contract expires in June 2006, Bowman said recycling is among many issues the contract might address.

"When a contract like this is negotiated, there are many areas of campus that would like to see their area of campus served," Bowman said. "There's a lot of different ideas on how the economic value of that

contract should be dispersed."

Of the Coke machines on campus, 114 dispense cans and 266 have bottles, she said.

At the University of Oregon-Eugene, recycling funding is part of the school's soft drink contract, said Karyn Kaplan, recycling program manager.

The school receives \$600 per month for recycling and \$1,200 per year for maintenance costs, Kaplan said. Getting the funding in the contract was not a problem, she said.

"They were happy to contribute - it makes them look good," Kaplan said. "It's a good step in terms of producer responsibility."

Kaplan said soft drink vendors make a lot of money from the school, and contributing toward recycling gives a company the opportunity to give back to the university.

As for McKenzie, who has worked in recycling at the University for 10 years, sorting cans from bottles will not concern him for much longer. After he retires in June, he said, he'll have other concerns - such as fishing.

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