



JACKIE SCHULTZ

LEVERAGING AN ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

This past summer my younger daughter, who will be a college senior, spent a lot of time at the beach. But it wasn't to sunbathe or swim. She is an Environmental Studies major and as part of her senior capstone project she interned at a Cleveland-based organization that is a member of the Alliance for the Great Lakes, which hosts weekly beach cleanups.

Several times a week she would head to Edgewater Park on Lake Erie and pick up trash with other volunteers. They documented everything on prepared forms that categorized the different types of trash. My daughter collected the forms and logged the information into a central database.

The other morning as she was tallying the results I asked her about the most common types of trash found on the shoreline. Without hesitation, she said, "Plastic packaging."

Twenty-two million pounds – that is how much plastic enter the Great Lakes each year. Pollution on these five lakes, which hold 84% of North America's fresh surface water, threaten the drinking water and health of 30 million people.

Enough is Enough

As I was organizing my thoughts for this column, I came across an article in TAPPI's Over the Wire e-newsletter that was headlined, "A Whopping 91% of Plastic Isn't Recycled." The news story was a summary of an article that was published in *National Geographic*. The

statistics about the amount of plastic that ends up in our trash and our oceans is astounding. Even the scientists who examined how much plastic has been produced, discarded, burned, or put in landfills were horrified. Here are some highlights:

- Mass production of plastics, which began just six decades ago, has accelerated so rapidly that it has created 8.3 billion metric tons – most of it in disposable products that end up as trash.
- By mid-century, the oceans will contain more plastic waste than fish, ton for ton.
- Of the 8.3 billion metric tons of plastic that has been produced, 6.3 billion metric tons has become plastic waste. Of that, only 9% has been recycled. The vast majority – 79% – is accumulating in landfills or sloughing off in the natural environment as litter. At some point, much of it ends up in the oceans, the final sink.
- If present trends continue, by 2050, there will be 12 billion metric tons of plastic in landfills. That amount is 35,000 times as heavy as the Empire State Building.
- The rapid acceleration of plastic manufacturing, which so far has doubled roughly every 15 years, has outpaced nearly every other man-made material.
- Half of all plastic manufactured becomes trash in less than a year.
- Much of the growth in plastic production has been the increased use

of plastic packaging, which accounts for more than 40% of non-fiber plastic.

- It is estimated that 8 million metric tons of plastic end up in the oceans every year. That is the equivalent of five grocery bags of plastic trash for every foot of coastline around the globe.
- Plastic takes more than 400 years to degrade, so most of it still exists in some form. Only 12% has been incinerated.

No Excuses

Jenna Jambeck, an environmental engineer who specializes in studying plastic waste in the oceans, says gaining control of plastic waste is now such a large task that it calls for rethinking plastic chemistry, product design, recycling strategies, and consumer use.

The U.S. ranks behind Europe (30%) and China (25%) in plastic recycling. Recycling in the U.S. has remained at 9% since 2012. In stark contrast, the U.S. paper recovery rate is 67.2%.

This information is an opportunity to leverage the environmental advantages of paper-based packaging. If there was ever a chance to convince your customers that corrugated is a better alternative, now is it. ■

Feel free to contact me with story ideas, comments or suggestions. I can be reached at 440-356-2257 or e-mail jschultz@corrugatedtoday.com