

Ms. Anca Giurgiulescu
c/o Randy Vail
North Hollywood High School
5231 Colfax Avenue
North Hollywood, CA 91601

Dear Anca:

Thank you for your letter of August 1, 2003, to Acting Administrator Horinko expressing your concern over the amount of packaging generated in the United States and your support for waste prevention and recycling. She has asked me to reply to your letter.

The EPA does not have legal authority to establish regulations requiring companies to use packaging with less environmental impact. Instead, we rely on voluntary approaches to encourage the reduction of all kinds of municipal solid waste. We do this by working cooperatively with states, communities, and businesses. We also try to educate citizens so that they choose products that contain packaging that is less harmful to the environment.

To obtain information on packaging standards, you may want to contact an association of packaging professionals to see if they could provide you with any guidelines used by their members. One such association is the Institute of Packaging Professionals (IOPP). The American Forest and Paper Association (AF&PA) may also have information on packaging standards, especially as they relate to corrugated containers and paperboard packaging. Information on IOPP and AF&PA is available from their websites at www.iopp.org and www.afandpa.org.

However, it is not always easy to determine which packaging is most beneficial to the environment. As you mention, the use of recycled content is a positive environmental attribute that should be encouraged. And packaging that uses less material is generally better for the environment, assuming the packaging is sufficient to protect the product from damage. However, packaging that uses slightly more material than other packaging may actually be less harmful for the environment if it contains a high percentage of recycled content or is a material that will be recycled. This can be rather tricky, though, since material that can be recycled in one jurisdiction may not be recycled in another area.

There are many other issues that need to be considered when determining the environmental impact of packaging. For example, many states have adopted legislation to reduce

the amount of heavy metals in packaging and packaging components that are sold or distributed throughout the United States. For more information, you can view the following website: www.csg.org/CSG/Policy/environment/toxics+in+packaging+clearinghouse.

Writing to manufacturers can be an effective way to let them know that the environmental impact of a product's packaging is an important factor in your decision to buy a particular product. If companies feel that consumers are less likely to buy products with packaging that has a negative impact on the environment, for example products that are "over-packaged," they may consider redesigning their packaging.

You may want to visit the EPA Student Center website at www.epa.gov/students. This website is an excellent resource for middle and high school students to explore a wide range of environmental issues including recycling. Additional information and documents are available from our website at www.epa.gov/msw, or the website of EPA's WasteWise program at www.epa.gov/wastewise where you will find the WasteWise Update "A Fresh Look at Packaging" listed under Publications.

The Federal government is one of the largest consumers of products in the country. How we spend our money makes a big impact on manufacturers and the economy. To set an example for the rest of the country, the Federal government buys millions of dollars worth of products, such as paper, made from recycled materials. We have issued recommendations on buying products with recycled content or other attributes favorable to the environment, which can be viewed at www.epa.gov/cpg and www.epa.gov/opptintr/epp. We encourage state and local governments, businesses, and industry to use these websites when making purchasing decisions.

Again, thank you for your letter. I am afraid Ms. Horinko is unable to put in a personal appearance at your school. We are, however, delighted about your interest in the environment. I hope the information I provided will help you in your research. If you have further questions please contact Deborah Hanlon of my staff at 703 308-5824 or hanlon.deborah@epa.gov.

Sincerely,

Robert Springer, Director
Office of Solid Waste

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