

Where have all the boxes gone?

By Julia Watson
UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

WASHINGTON, Jan. 13 (UPI) -- One of the anomalies of the growing organic food business is that most of its produce is delivered to buyers in packaging that is not biodegradable. Most fresh chicken, meat, fish and wet, damp or ice-packed products, whether organic or conventional, arrives at supermarkets and restaurants in wax-coated corrugated boxes made from virgin tree pulp. That wax coating makes these boxes non-recyclable.

Scott Seydel, a self-confessed tree-hugger, thinks that is a short life for a tree. He would like to see those boxes given five or six lives before being dumped. The board chairman and chief executive officer of EvCo Research and president of the award-winning Seydel Companies, a manufacturer of textile process chemicals based in Atlanta, Seydel's company invents and makes products from reclaimed and recycled consumer waste materials.

His interest in recyclable packaging was aroused in 1990 when he learned from neighboring Coca-Cola Company that it had been able to design a single-serve plastic bottle holding 20 ounces of Coke that wouldn't lose its fizz -- till then a problem in small sizes. "Where is all that plastic going to go?" he wondered.

And those were the good old days. "In 1991-2, we recycled about 50 percent. Now it's below 17 percent." Then after the terror attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the water bottle market just went crazy, too, he says. "Eighty-three percent is going to the dump."

But he's found a use for polyethylene terephthalate plastic, or PET. A polymer chemist, he sees it as a good building block for other products. His subsidiary company, Seydel-Woolley, turns it into a coating that protects yarn from fraying while being woven and is peeled off when finished. It seemed to Seydel this process could be used with paper packaging and cartons. He began experimenting with cardboard, then corrugated paper. Now he has succeeded with pizza boxes, donut cartons, meat packaging and papers. "They all seem to work," he says with a smile in his voice.

The implications for the grocery trade are immense. Currently, grocery retailers must pay to have their non-recyclable packaging shipped to the dump. With Seydel's products, the packaging could be recycled five or six times. Then it would end its life as compost. Not bad for a tree.

Yet so far there's not a great deal of demand in the U.S. industry at large. It buys 85 percent of its packaging from China -- cardboard coated with a paraffin wax mixed with polyethylene that turns it into a liquid cling-wrap film that can't be separated off.

"You're dealing with a very traditional industry. You're not talking about product but the package it comes in." There would be a significant investment involved in a changeover. And, as he says, research and development departments "all got shoved in the last economic downturn."

"Grocers would really like to save the money. But it's difficult to get suppliers to change." Besides, there's always the vexing question of liability. If produce arrives in poor condition, the buyer can claim against the supplier. But if the purchaser specifies the type of packaging he requires and a shipment then arrives in poor condition, it could well be the purchaser who becomes liable.

That may not sound like potential trouble -- until you consider how far fresh food travels these days. The salmon industry is now in Chile. That's also where 40 percent of our grapes come from. Bananas are imported from Costa Rica, much of our fresh produce from Guatemala and Mexico. Arguing long distance over goods damaged perhaps as a result of particular packaging is not an attractive prospect.

So far, Albertsons, the nation's second-largest food and drug retailer, is backing Seydel's recyclable cartons for donuts and cakes; Little Caesar's pizza slices come in his recyclable cartons. And his company is working on a number of new products from recyclable butchers' wrap to the outer layer of baby diapers, making them completely compostable.

Seydel thinks the best bet is to get grocers together to agree on backing disposable packaging as a whole industry, so there is no loss in what he describes as "a traditional market" of what he admires as "a certain type of cordiality."

Canada has just instituted a fee for any use of non-recyclable packaging. Testing for recyclable packaging is currently going on in Japan, Australia, Germany, France, Sweden, Spain and the Netherlands.

Recycling should be forced back into the public psyche. Those plastic beer bottles seen at sports events are the beginning of the end of both the recyclable glass bottle and the can, Seydel predicts. He says Coca Cola have just come up with a smaller 8- to 12-ounce plastic bottle that can retain gas. They will be produced on the same line that fills them with drink, a saving of 5 percent to 6 percent on the total cost of the finished product over cans, which are manufactured elsewhere before being shipped for filling. So Seydel's question, "Where is all that plastic going to go?" becomes even more potent.