

Ecomaine says throw away Styrofoamtm packaging



When ecomaine, a non-profit, municipally-owned, waste disposal and recycling organization, brought single-sort recycling to Maine in May, 2007 its new, state-of-the-art equipment and changing markets made it possible for people to recycle plastics stamped with any number from one to seven (#1-7). The expanded range of numbered plastics not only increased the amount of material that could be recycled, it helped to simplify remembering which plastics could and could not be recycled. Then, along came polystyrene foam, stamped with the number six. Missi Labbe, ecomaine's recycling program manager, said, "We get several calls every month asking if styrofoamtm, which is actually a brand name for one type of polystyrene - stamped

with a number six, is recyclable in our program. Unfortunately, the answer is no. Neither are the other, thinner foam polystyrenes such as those used as grocery store meat trays or take-out coffee cups." The main reason, she explained, is that there are no buyers for that material. Demand is what dictates whether or not a material is recyclable. When the material collected can be sold as a resource or raw material to manufacturers who will make something new from it, recycling works. When the new product is made and sold, the cycle begins again. The problem with polystyrene foam is that it is too lightweight to transport. That is, it is injected with air to make it both lightweight and a good insulator, so a tractor trailer truck filled to the top would be transporting

a lot of air, but not enough substance to pay for the cost of transportation. This is true even when the material is compressed into bales. That is why polystyrene (styrofoamtm) cannot be put in your recycling bin. "However," added Labbe, "the other types of #6 plastics are recyclable." Ecomaine Recycling Committee Chairman, Troy Moon, explained that despite some confusion over No. 6 styrofoamtm, the percentage of unrecyclable material, called residue, has been under five percent. "That's an amazingly low rate for residue," he said. "Residents from our 32 towns do a fantastic job of recycling and we want to encourage them to do even more." It is hoped that clarifying why an item cannot be recycled will help people remember the dos and don'ts of ecomaine's single-sort system.