

THE PRINCETON PACKET



SOLUTIONS

By Huck Fairman

Decrease in plastics usage is necessary to survive

In the 1967 movie, "The Graduate," Dustin Hoffman's character was offered advice for his future in the form of one word, *plastics*.

Now, once again, plastics has gained prominence in considering the future. In addition to the global warming crisis facing the world, we are facing a profusion of plastics, in our oceans and even on land. This is not only an aesthetic problem but is one of life and death for many creatures living in the oceans and other water bodies, and will be ultimately one that affects human health.

Complicating responses to both global crises is the expansion of nationalist ideologies which spurn international or global cooperation to these and other problems. Distressingly this expansion comes when both crises are reaching levels that threaten the survival of species and civilization.

While many are now familiar with the causes and solutions to global warm-

ing, the plastics problem may be less well known, and is one more complicated than it first appears.

An article in World Wildlife magazine calculates that every minute a dump-truck loaded with plastics goes into the ocean. Over a year, that's a lot of loads. Plastics are overrunning environments.

The good news is that awareness is rising. The bad news is that civilization is ever devising more uses for plastics, while not increasing its abilities to recycle and manage the resulting waste.

To those who say simply stop using plastics, the unfortunate reply is that eliminating plastics from our lives is "neither feasible nor desirable." Plastics provide many benefits, including keeping food fresh in sterile, durable containers, allowing us to waste less. And many of those plastics can be recycled.

But the sheer volume is a problem. Half of all plastics ever made has been pro-

duced in the last 15 years. Most plastics in the ocean come from the land. In the U.S. while most of the common plastic used in soda bottles is collected, only approximately 30% is recycled, because items are contaminated or there are not adequate facilities. The rest goes into trash and landfills, and/or onto the land and waterways.

In developing countries, the problems are worse as they lack adequate waste management.

But just because plastics are so important to our lifestyles and economies, it does not mean changes should not be implemented. Only recyclable plastics should be used. Alternatives to plastics should be devised. Everyone should make the effort to use fewer plastics.

As with the global warming crisis, all community levels need to play a role: individuals, governments, companies and the waste management industries. Companies can make choices on how products

are packaged. Technology can expand the numbers of products that can be recycled. Consumers can also make choices on packaging.

Scale will also be important. Companies can cooperate to create alternatives and/or simply to make recycling economically feasible. Governments too can provide research on improved methods and products, while also nudging the private sector toward further improvements.

But the waste management piece is not simple. Some waste management companies can make more money sending plastics to landfill than recycling them. Companies themselves come and go. Investment is necessary to start up and adapt. Over all, a more holistic approach will be necessary.

Finally, as with the global warming crisis itself, public interest and pressure, which is growing, will be needed to ensure necessary action.