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From the Los Angeles Times

Santa Monica eateries going green

New rules have most restaurants using biodegradable food containers. But the cost worries small vendors.

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Santa Monica city officials, hoping to put an end to the blight of discarded take-out boxes and beverage cups on their beach, are gearing up to implement a ban on nonrecyclable foam and plastic early next year.

Facing a Feb. 9 deadline, most of Santa Monica's restaurants have switched to biodegradable food containers. For many, however, the switch has been a struggle, with some small-business owners saying they are still scrambling to find affordable material to replace cheap polystyrene, or plastic foam.

Josephine Miller said she sent nearly 700 letters to vendors offering supplier contacts and biodegradable options after she was hired in July to help the city's Environmental Programs Division implement the ban.

"Food providers have to learn new habits, and they're already exhausted during the holiday season," Miller said. "But we're sitting down with businesses and doing a lot of hand-holding."

Most of the waste on Santa Monica's beach comes from foam containers, said Mark Gold, chairman of the city's environmental task force. On each side of the Santa Monica Pier, visitors often encounter clumps of trash, bottle caps and cigarette butts half-buried around lidless garbage cans, and remnants of foam and plastic containers obscuring bird tracks in the sand.

Because the material breaks into small pieces but does not decompose, cleanup tractors retrieve only a fraction of foam trash. The rest is swept out to sea or buried in the sand, causing illness or death in animals that mistake the foam for food.

City facilities and events stopped using foam and plastic food containers in February. Private food vendors have until Feb. 9 to comply with the ban. First-time violators will receive a written warning, followed by a \$100 fine for a second violation and \$250 fines for each successive violation.

Miller's division has budgeted \$15,715 for a new employee to monitor the city's restaurants, and \$31,000 for supplies and public education for two years.

Although the division is responsible for citing violators, Miller said she expects the community to help pressure restaurants to comply.

Officials said Santa Monica is playing catch-up to nearly a dozen other California cities, including Calabasas and Malibu, that have banned plastic foam from city facilities or private vendors.

Since Malibu adopted its ban in 2005, most businesses have switched to biodegradable materials without trouble, said Jennifer Voccola, the city's environmental programs coordinator. But Malibu has to keep track of fewer vendors than Santa Monica, she said.

"It's pretty low key, though we want to amp things up with more inspections after the new year," Voccola said. "Cities considering a ban should make sure they have all their ducks in a row first."

Laguna Beach passed a ban Dec. 4, and Long Beach is in the process of implementing a ban.

Santa Monica is the only city in the state to ban both polystyrene and nonrecyclable plastic, Miller said.

A 1992 attempt to prohibit plastic foam in Santa Monica failed when the City Council bypassed a proposed ban in favor of a pilot recycling program pitched by foam and plastics manufacturers, Gold said. But foam still peppered the beaches months later, and the experiment was called off.

This time, Mayor Richard Bloom said, businesses are showing off their "green" containers.

On 4th Street, the upscale Mexican restaurant Border Grill replaced its polystyrene containers with corn-based containers in fall, said co-owner Mary Sue Milliken.

"This is a great place to set an example -- the city is small enough and there are enough progressive thinkers in government that we aren't daunted by the hassle of creating change," Milliken said.

Border Grill has been environmentally conscious since its launch 17 years ago, when it used foil and cardboard containers, Milliken said. But until recently, biodegradable materials were "outrageously expensive," she said.

Even now, the costs of swapping are hefty. Border Grill, which has a large take-out and catering business, spends \$1,100 monthly on to-go supplies -- \$200 more each month than last year. A case of 2,000 corn-based soufflé cups costs \$51, nearly double the price of a case of polystyrene cups.

The prices could be crippling to smaller businesses, such as Sparky's Frozen Yogurt Shop on Main Street. Tommy Makino, who owns and runs the small shop alone, said he recently spoke to a paper distributor about switching out the shop's plastic and polystyrene cups.

Makino said he is nervous about using paper, because plastic foam is best for insulating cold drinks. He said he expects the cost of the new cups to be at least twice what he pays now.

"Styrofoam is much cheaper, and I worry, since prices for everything else are going up and competition is already hard to deal with," Makino said. "But I have no choice but to switch."

The cost has pushed some vendors to get creative, with paper cones for French fries at the Victorian Restaurant and paper baggies for cookies at Cafe Luxe. "Green" containers are getting

cheaper as distributors compete for contracts, Miller said.

Despite opposing the ordinance before it was passed, the California Restaurant Assn. is now working with the city to help restaurants meet the deadline.

But a higher minimum wage and a limited selection of "green" containers have left small vendors feeling the pinch, said Andrew Casana, the association's director of local government affairs.

"Foam is one of the best values for cold and hot foods," he said. "The ordinance is going to hit people at the bottom line."

At Border Grill, hot foods must be placed in waxed cardboard boxes because the corn-based containers break down near high temperatures, Milliken said.

The restaurant reuses its catering containers, so the containers have to be able to withstand washing.

"It's more work for everybody at every station," Milliken said. "Polystyrene was so much more indestructible. We have to deal with a little more fragility now."

Some, like Casana, said biodegradable trash is just as likely as polystyrene to make it onto Santa Monica's beach. None of the beach's garbage cans have lids, which gives wind and scavenging birds easy access to the garbage. Bloom said he was not aware of any upcoming efforts to add lids.

"Whatever you replace polystyrene with, it'll still end up on the beach," Casana said. "Unless we change people's behavior, it's like telling them it's OK to pollute."