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News Release

Plastic, Let's Recycle

When I was growing up in the 60's and early 70's each time we headed out on a trip or to the field to work we would fix a cooler of water to carry. This consisted of running water from the faucet, adding ice and using a glass or paper cup to drink with. Not much waste. Today we dump a case of bottled water in an ice chest, add ice and we're set. But, we also have a good bit of waste.

Now that I have your attention lets talk about plastics. Plastics fall into seven general categories, which are divided by the type of resin contained in the plastic. The resin type is identified by a number (from one to seven) inside a triangle of arrows on the bottom of the product.

Plastics with #1 indicate the presence of polyethylene terephthalate—often found in plastic water bottles and food containers. Plastics with #2 are high density polyethylene found in plastic water bottles, grocery bags and bottles that contain cleaners. Plastics with #3 contain polyvinyl chloride (PVC) which is used in plumbing pipe and fencing. Plastics with #4 contain low density polyethylene which is what you'll find in toys, container lids and garbage bags. Plastics with#5 contain polypropylene which makes up bottle caps and some appliances. Plastics with #6 contain polystyrene which is found in packing peanuts, compact disc cases and solo drink cups. Group #7 usually indicates that the product is made of a combination of resins.

Categories #1 and #2 are most commonly accepted at recycling centers. It's important to note that recycling plastic is often referred to as downcycling, which means it becomes a lower-quality material. Recycled plastic bottles don't become the same bottle, but rather a product such as plastic lumber.

The Earth Policy Institute estimates that buried plastic bottles can take up to 1000 years to break down, and therefore will continue to hog much-needed space in landfills. In contrast, a banana peel and many other types of organic waste take only a few weeks.

Plastic is derived from crude oil and according to the Earth Policy Institute it takes approximately 17 million barrels of oil just to make the amount of bottles used by Americans annually for bottled water, which is enough to fuel 1,000,000 U.S. cars for a year. Conversely, each ton of plastic bottles recycled saves about 3.8 barrels of oil, according to the American Chemistry Council.

In today's fast paced life that we live in we will continue to use plastic in many ways but, we can make an effort to recycle, thus reducing the demand for crude oil and landfill space.

For more information about this topic or other related topics please contact Lewis Tapley, Regional Extension Agent-Forestry, Wildlife, Natural Resources and Ponds at the St. Clair County Extension Office at (205) 338-9416 or email tapllell@auburn.edu.