

AGRICULTURE

Berry growers going green

Major producers commit to 100% recyclable packaging by 2025

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SANTA CRUZ » Strawberries, blueberries and raspberries of North America will soon receive an environmentally-friendly update to their plastic packaging. A group of major berry producers recently announced a commitment that containers used to ship and sell these yummy fruits will be wholly

recyclable by 2025.

The California Strawberry Commission, the North American Blueberry Council, Mexico-based Aneberries, members of the National Berry Crops Initiative and South American exporters have all joined the pledge to further reduce the produce industry's environmental impact.

"Clamshell packaging revolutionized the ability of berry

growers to transport their fruit to consumers nationwide," said Henry Bierlink, president of the National Berry Crops Initiative, in a prepared release. "Now, the industry is working together on the next phase of that revolution, one that preserves the ability to safely transport fresh berries to market while minimizing product damage, reducing food waste, and demonstrating ongoing environ-

mental stewardship."

PET — short for polyethylene terephthalate — clamshells are the lightweight plastic containers that hold the berries bought at the local supermarket. The clear plastic package is shaped as a vented box with a hinged lid — resembling a clam's shell.

This packaging was first adopted by the majority of berry producers in North America in the 1990s and is still used today. They are made from about 50% recycled plastic water bottles

and scrap from plastic manufacturing processes. The lightweight containers protect the fruit from damage and contamination, creating a market for recycled plastic and reducing food waste.

"Since China stopped accepting plastic recycling, the market has essentially collapsed for PET clamshells," said Carolyn O'Donnell, communications director for the California Strawberry Commission.

According to O'Donnell, many

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of the plastic PET clamshells are already recyclable, but the labels or glue on the labels contaminate the plastic and prevent it from being recycled.

“Those glues are permanent,” said Gudrun Schmidt, an associate professor at Purdue University and expert in polymer science. “When it comes to recycling, the adhesives in tape and labels gum up the recycling machinery.”

The growing concern about plastic waste, global disruption in the reuse of plastic, and proposed legislation meant that North America’s berry industry needed to find new ways to reduce their impact on the environment.

“Berry growers are always looking for more sustainable farming options,” O’Donnell said.

Berry producers were

among the first in the crop industry to adopt drip irrigation and integrated pest management practices decades ago. Then the introduction of the PET clamshell, made from about 50% recycled plastic, landed the berry industry among the top post-consumer recycled food package producers in the U.S more than a decade ago.

“Achieving 100% recycle-ready packaging represents the type of continuous improvement that is common among farmers as they strive for ever improving efficiency,” said Rick Tomlinson, president of the California Strawberry Commission, in a prepared release.

Javier Zamora, grower and owner of JSM Organics based in Royal Oaks, opted into using a 100% compostable package years ago. JSM Organics offers organic produce ranging from heirloom tomatoes and summer squash, to strawberries. Although a

compostable or recyclable package can cost three to four times the cost of standard packaging, his customers are willing to pay a little more for a product with a lighter carbon footprint. And he’s excited that the rest of the berry industry will soon be on board as well.

“It’s about time that the industry pays attention to our environment, plastic being one of them ... it’s the responsible thing to do,” Zamora said.

With the industry committing to move toward “recycle ready” packaging, new glue and labels that align with design standards set forth by the Association of Plastic Recyclers will be used, O’Donnell said.

Some of the berry producers are also supporting the development of new materials by experimenting with cardboard containers and newer bioplastics, both of which can be recycled or composted.