

ADVISORY STATEMENT ON KIMBERLY CLARK'S "RIGHT CYCLE" PROGRAM

Statement

Kimberly Clark Company (KCC) and their distributor (VWR) are to be commended for their efforts. However, the Right Cycle program as proposed to CU and other universities needs improvement in order for it to be successful and sustainable. These improvements include the producer bearing more of the cost of recovering their product, modifying grade specifications and participant instructions, as well as attaining higher and better end uses of recovered material. CU recommends, and encourages other universities to recommend, that these improvements are advanced by KCC and its supply-chain partners as a requirement for the program to be fully embraced or expanded.

Background

CU received proposals from KCC in August and November, 2015 after several individual labs started participating in the program, without first contacting the campus recycling program. CU Green Labs requested CU Recycling's assistance in early 2016. Listserve queries by CU Recycling found other schools as either early adopters (UCSC, Texas, Illinois, etc) or who declined to participate (UC-Berkeley, University of Oregon, Genentech, etc). Still others had questions after their labs requested lab glove recycling from conferences or through their suppliers. Questions and concerns included collection equipment, instructions, limiting acceptable brands of gloves, health and safety/contamination, costs of the program- especially storage and shipping. There didn't appear to be prior campus stakeholder involvement, demonstration projects, or vetting of pilot programs before the Right Cycle program was announced.

Need

For this program to be more successful and sustainable- capable of being endorsed by, and expanded at CU, KCC and its suppliers need to commit to improvements. First, a more basic understanding is needed of operational challenges to training and maintaining a waste diversion program. Discriminating brands of gloves for instance should be revised.ⁱ Costs to the campus should be fully understood and extended campus-wide over a multi-year horizon to know what the campus is committing to. Capital costs for containers in addition to custodial removal (or volunteer coordination), large storage space requirements, and significant shipping costs should be reviewed. Finally, Zero Waste campuses like CU have missions driven by important concepts of market demand and the highest and best use of post consumer materials. Rather than shipping a low-value material like nitrile across the country to down-cycle as a filling blend, KCC should commit to work with its suppliers, recycling industry associations, and higher education to develop alternative end uses (ideally displacing virgin inputs for gloves or other KCC products), that are more financially sustainable- as many other commodity markets have done.

Recommendation

Rather than discontinuing the program, it is recommended KCC re-commit to working with CU to analyze two areas: 1) full recovery potential.ⁱⁱ This would require a basic, full-cost budget, identifying at least shipping costs to be included as part of KCC and supplier's commitment. Since CU departments are already recycling gloves as a result of KCC and VWR's early efforts, and it is preferred by all parties that these efforts should not be discouraged if possible, CU will need written commitment that the program currently in place will continue. Before CU formally adopts a glove recycling program with Kimberly Clark, VWR will provide lab-sized, take-back boxes with pre-paid shipping. CU's Green Labs can project training, removal, storage, and staging. The CU Zero Waste Partnership should be consulted. 2) The second area needing commitment involves market development and alternative end uses for post-consumer nitrile. KCC should commit to advancing the ability to recover a wider range of gloves. Sponsored research at relevant academic departments at CU or a consortium of schools should be planned in the short-term.

ⁱ For recyclability of nitrile/poly blends see: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0167577X95001077>

ⁱⁱ The estimate of 5 tons per year at CU-Boulder should be reviewed with CU's space assignment for lab space and recent waste composition analysis.