

THE INSTITUTION RECYCLING NETWORK



IRN Recycles Shrink Wrap from Rhode Island Marinas

It's a bit of a stretch for the Network, but this spring we recycled 40,000 pounds of shrink wrap from Rhode Island marinas.

In a pilot project sponsored by the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation and American Plastics Council, we worked with 15 marinas to recycle wrap from close to 1,500 boats. The project demonstrated a simple model that makes it cost effective to recycle shrink wrap from any area where marinas can be organized for milk-run collection (an IRN specialty). Based on the success in 2005, we're working to expand into a statewide initiative for the coming year.

If you've driven by any marina in the winter, you've seen boats wrapped under blue or white plastic like so many tents. The use of shrink wrap has exploded in the past fifteen years; over a million pounds were sold in Rhode Island last year.

But shrink wrap is also one of the most glaring examples of the throwaway society: a valuable, highly engineered material that's meant to be used once and then discarded. It's bulky, it's expensive to dispose of, and it will sit in landfills for centuries. There have been fitful attempts to recycle it, but nothing that's taken hold.

Last year, the Rhode Island Resource Recovery Corporation (which manages Rhode Island's central landfill) heard about the IRN and our logistics capabilities (like milk run collection for oddball recyclables) and asked us to take a look at marine shrink wrap. With over 100 marinas concentrated in the smallest state in the nation, the surge of shrink wrap they see each spring is a serious issue. We got together with the Rhode Island Marine Trades Association, questioned marina operators about what would and wouldn't work in a recycling program, found a hauler/processor, and put together a pilot project with all the hallmarks of an IRN program: simple, simple, simple.

We worked with fifteen marinas this spring. In March, we procured and distributed big clear plastic bags, clearly labeled for recycling only, and large enough to hold about 25 pounds of shrink wrap (enough to cover a 30-foot boat). The marinas paid \$10.00 for each bag, a very small fraction of the cost to wrap and store a boat, and a cost which most passed on to boat owners. Then in April and May when boats were being unwrapped, we sent out a milk run once a week to collect the wrap in a rear-load packer. The wrap was returned to our processor, where it was immediately baled and held for market.

Almost the best news is the market itself. The shrink wrap was sold to Trex, which makes plastic/wood composite lumber for (among other things) boat docks. So Rhode Island's shrink wrap can be returned in a product which directly benefits the state's boating industry. In terms of closing the loop, this is about as good as it gets.

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