The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Recycling Coming to a Garbage Pile Near You

By Lena Smirnova

October 30, 2012



Residents of Solnechnogorsk prove that recycling works, especially if collection points are plentiful and nearby.

SOLNECHNOGORSK, Moscow Region – Solnechnogorsk may not always live up to its sunny name in terms of weather. But even on a gloomy Tuesday morning while the clouds gathered for the impending icy rain, there were bright spots to be found in unlikely places — at garbage containers outside buildings all around the city.

A young woman, shivering from the cold, exited her apartment block with her household waste. Part of this load went into a common garbage can next to her building while a collection of plastic bottles went into a recycling bin that sat next to it, decorated with colorful flowers.

The inhabitants of this town don't have to go far for the chance to be eco friendly. The local recycling factory Plarus has funded the bins and the pickup service, while the city

administration, in partnership with the Coca-Cola Company, have helped educate the locals about the value of the project.

Solnechnogorsk is the only city in the Moscow region that has a municipally approved bottle recycling system for plastic bottles and the country's only recycling plant that turns bottles into food-safe plastic.

Although a few of the green wire mesh bins disappeared — a problem attributed to rabbit husbandry — this yearlong recycling project has been labeled a success.

But experts generally lament that such a system is still not widespread in Russia – and in particular, that it doesn't exist in Moscow.

Recycling containers were introduced to Solnechnogorsk, a city with a population of 60,000, in October 2011. One year later, there are 100 such receptacles set up near standard garbage bins. About 60 tons of bottles were collected since the project started, which is almost 50 percent of the total weight of bottles used in the city, said Aleksander Filipishin, general director of Plarus recycling company.

Workers from the Plarus plant collect the bottles from bins, process them, and then sell the recycled granules to bottle producers or other companies that need plastic materials. Orders for the granules come as far as Sochi since Plarus is the only plant in the country whose end product can be used for food packaging.

The facility, which started working in 2009, processes an average 50 tons of bottles per day and operates at capacity in the summer months, said the plant's director Igor Mikheyev. In off-season periods like October the plant works at 85 to 90 percent capacity.

In addition to the city project, the plant gets plastic from bottle makers with defective manufacturing runs and from recycling facilities. But here the plant runs into problems.

Plastic containers picked up from the ground are often dirty and sometimes carry harmful microbes. During the New Years holiday period it is impossible not to notice the odors of traditional Russian salads on the bottles, Mikheyev said.

"[The bottles that city residents turn in] are crystal clear in comparison to what we get now," Filipishin said. "The productivity of the plant can increase up to 20 percent if it works only with these bottles: the kind that don't need to be cleaned or processed in other ways."

By throwing the bottles in separate containers they stay clean and help make the plant more efficient because it can then save money on the chemicals used to wash the bottles and speed up the overall cycle, experts said.

Another challenge for recyclers is that the bottles used in Russia are not always suitable for reprocessing. Up to 35 percent of the waste material that Plarus buys is not recyclable, Filipishin said.

One of the key problems now is that Russian producers use synthetic glue to put labels on the bottles. In Europe, only natural glue is allowed on food packaging. This type of glue is easier to wash off in comparison to adhesives used in Russia, which require significantly more

cleaning effort and ruin the final quality of the reprocessed plastic.

"There are not a lot of efforts required. Just the will to achieve the desired result," plant director Mikheyev said, adding that he wants sanitation rules to be put in place to regulate what glue is used.

And for now, there are still not enough bottles being recycled. This is not because Russians are opposed to recycling and won't hand in their products, said Alexei Kiselyov, head of the waste program at Greenpeace Russia.

"It is not that people don't recycle their waste. There is just nowhere to hand it in," Kiselyov said.

Solnechnogorsk is not the only Russian city with a recycling program. St. Petersburg, Ufa, Samara and Volgograd also have such initiatives, although not all of them are focused on collecting bottles.

In Moscow, volunteers have drawn up a map of recycle bins, but there is no city-wide system in place although officials in the Yugo-Zapadny district are expected to sign a 15-year recycling contract in the near future.

There is a lack of incentive in the government and the belief that recycling is time-consuming, Kiselyov said. Officials at Plarus are not ruling out expanding their Solnechnogorsk project into the region and the city.

"Moscow and the Moscow region consume up to 150,000 tons [of bottles] per year. If we can collect the same 50 percent as we do in Solnechnogorsk, that's 75,000 tons!" Filipishin said.

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