

Packing foam packed with virtues, maker says

By BRUCE ERSKINE Business Reporter
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Dave Ball, sales manager of Truefoam Ltd., stands between pillars of uncut expanded polystyrene, better known as Styrofoam. Ball says expanded polystyrene is capable of being recycled and is cost-efficient. (Christian Laforce / Staff)

Expanded polystyrene, or EPS, suffers from an image problem, says David Ball, sales manager with Truefoam Ltd. in Dartmouth.

"Life cycle analysis shows that EPS has far less impact on the environment than competitive products," he said in an interview Tuesday.

EPS, which is commonly referred to by the brand name Styrofoam, has been used widely in packaging for a number of years.

Although recyclable, the petroleum byproduct has been banned in some U.S. municipalities as environmentally unfriendly because it isn't as biodegradable as cardboard.

"It's the biggest thing I deal with on a day-to-day basis," said Ball, whose firm began making polystyrene insulation in the 1960s and diversified into moulding EPS containers for the seafood industry in 1988.

"I'm told by my customers that their customers in Europe and Asia are pressuring them for environmentally friendly products," he said.

"The perception is that cardboard is more environmentally friendly than EPS."

Ball said studies done at the University of Victoria concluded that polystyrene is less environmentally harmful to produce than cardboard.

The studies found that cardboard containers take 2.3 to 3.8 times more energy to produce than EPS containers while generating 3.1 to 4.1 times more air pollution and 2.3 to 2.8 times more water pollution.

They also found that the global warming impact of producing cardboard containers is four to 4.4 times greater than producing chemically inert EPS containers, which Ball said are stronger than their cardboard counterparts.

"We're not trying to put down the cardboard industry, but some misconceptions need to be addressed," he said, noting that seafood companies like Clearwater use EPS containers regularly to ship live lobsters from Halifax to Beijing by air.

"Clearwater's rate of mortality is less because of (EPS's) insulating value," Ball said.

David Green, plant manager with Northern Harvest Sea Farms in St. George, N.B., said EPS containers are bulkier to ship than cardboard but do a better job of keeping fish fresh.

"It holds the quality better," he said in an interview Tuesday, estimating that EPS containers are 50 to 60 per cent more thermally efficient than lined corrugated cardboard boxes.

Halifax Regional Municipality doesn't recycle EPS but Ball said it is recycled as part of curbside garbage collection in the U.K. and Australia.

"There are volume issues," he said, adding that EPS bans in municipalities in California, Oregon and Maine are a product of misinformation and recycling cost considerations.

"It (accounts) for one per cent of the total municipal waste in Canada," he said.

Truefoam has a polystyrene melting machine and uses recycled EPS in its insulation products.

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