

General Guidelines for Recycling at Mass Participant Sporting Events

Including Specific Recommendations for Recycling Heatsheets® Finishers Blankets



Photo courtesy of Gia Grant, SF Clean City Coalition

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INTRODUCTION

In 2008, mass participant sporting events across the U.S. and around the world began to take a more careful look at their environmental practices. All the major U.S. running and triathlon publications reported on the trend, and one—*Runner's World*—even went so far as to list its picks for the 10 Greenest Races in North America. Road Race Management held a one-day workshop on greening events in March, and followed that up with publication of a “how-to” booklet and an update session at its annual fall race directors’ meeting. Running USA will address the topic at its winter 2009 conference.

But it’s not just race directors and the media who are paying attention to the trend toward environmentally friendly events. Race participants are seeking out green events, and one non-profit organization—the Council for Responsible Sports—has developed a certification program for events that are looking for third-party validation of the good work they are doing.

It is with all of this in mind that AFMInc, the manufacturers of Heatsheets®, presents these guidelines for recycling at mass participant sporting events, with specific recommendations for recycling their low-density polyethylene finishers’ blankets that are distributed at long distance running events and triathlons. While much of what follows will not be new to savvy recyclers, it represents a concerted effort to update past projects like the *Race For The Cure Recycling Guide*, and reflects current expectations, practices, and challenges for implementing comprehensive waste management programs at mass participant sporting events.

What began as an AFM pilot project to develop and provide a guide for the recycling of “number 4” (LDPE-4) plastic waste, quickly turned into a much larger initiative. From the first of six pilot events, it became obvious that recovering Heatsheets for recycling was just one piece of a much larger puzzle race that directors face—how to effectively collect a wide range of recyclable and/or compostable materials at all race venues, from the site of the race expo, to the start and finish areas, as well as along the entire length of the race course.

So, while AFM’s primary interest is in providing a guide for race directors to recycle Heatsheets, we are pleased to provide what we hope will be a useful toolkit for any event organizer looking to minimize waste and maximize the recycling and composting of waste at their event.

But first a word of **caution**:

This guide was prepared in December 2008, during a time of extreme turmoil in the recycling marketplace. The worldwide economic downturn and the U.S. credit crisis have had a profound impact on recycling. Commodities that U.S. mills were outbidding each other for during last

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summer are now languishing in warehouses looking for any market at any price. China, which until recently imported thousands of tons of recycled material each month, has seen drastically reduced demand, and shipments of some commodities have stopped altogether. That is not to say that no recycling is happening at all, just that the emphasis has moved to the quality of the materials being recovered. With more supply than demand, clean recyclables will always have a market advantage over materials that are contaminated. As a result, ensuring that your recovery efforts result in clean, marketable material is now more important than ever. Hopefully this guide will assist you in your efforts, and market conditions will have improved by the time of your event.

GENERAL PLANNING

- 1. Assign a volunteer to coordinate the collection of recyclables, compostables, and garbage at your event.**

Ideally, this individual will have some understanding of the solid waste and recycling industry. If you can find someone who works in this field, so much the better. If not, use this guide and the links it contains to gather information for your recovery efforts.

Once you select a point person, have that individual select a group of volunteers to work together to maximize the recovery of material and keep contamination of recyclables to a minimum. If you have enough volunteers, separate them into crews with specific functions, such as putting the stations together, placing signs at each station, monitoring the recycling stations, working with vendors on their recycling efforts, and moving the collected material to a central staging area.

Assigning an individual to coordinate these aspects of your event is critical. Once selected, your coordinator can follow the remaining steps in this guide to ensure a successful recovery effort.

- 2. Contact the local solid waste authority to see if they are able to offer any assistance with your recycling efforts.**

Some cities require events to recycle, so checking with the local authorities is a must. They can be a great resource and should know all the companies in the area that provide the services you're looking for.

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The City of San Francisco is a good example. It has a special events ordinance that requires applicants to submit a recycling plan. The City offers periodic recycling workshops for event organizers and provides a very useful event recycling checklist at http://sfenvironment.org/our_programs/interests.html?ssi=3&ti=5&ii=191.

3. **Contact the company that will provide garbage and recycling services for your event.** (In some areas this may be the city itself.)

If your service provider turns out to be more than one company, you will have to meet with all of them to coordinate how the recycling and garbage collection will work. Have the company(s) designate an individual that will be the contact for the event so that you have somebody to go to with questions and advice.

4. **Establish the level of service you need with your garbage/recycling service provider.**

Base this level of service on past experience and the type of event you are conducting. Your solid waste authority may be able to offer some assistance in this area as well.

In general, you need a number of smaller recycling and garbage containers as well as larger dumpsters and or drop boxes that you can load the collected material into during the event.

Ask your recycler if materials can be mixed (commingled) so you will know how many different types of containers to put out. In some jurisdictions, all recycling can go into one container, with compost in another, and garbage in a third. Recycling standards may be different in your location, so having a clear understanding of what can and can't be mixed is important.

5. **Tell your service provider(s) that you want to know the weights of materials collected both as recycling and as garbage.** That way you will have a benchmark against which to measure your recycling efforts.

6. **Discuss with your recycler what materials you want to recover.**

If they do not provide all the services you require, see if they can partner with another company to fulfill your needs, or help you find a company that can recycle all the items you want to recover.

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Use the Internet to find facilities in your area that accept various materials. One good site is www.kab.org (Keep America Beautiful), which lists facilities nearest you based on your location and the materials you specify for recycling.

The American Chemistry Council also sponsors a site for accepting various types of plastics. See the list of resources on the last page of this guide for the URL.

7. Ask your service provider for their specifications of how they want the material prepared.

Most recyclers, for example, want to have material collected in clear plastic bags so they can see what is inside them. Garbage hauling companies may want to see material going to the landfill in black plastic bags. And composters, for the most part, will not accept material in plastic bags at all. They may, however, provide you with a list of compostable “bio-bags” that are accepted for use at their facility.

8. Because there is so much variation from one location to another, understanding what can be recovered in your city, and how to prepare it properly for recovery, is critical.

What you are trying to recycle, and how the particular item is made, will influence how it is recovered. Drinking cups, for example, may be recycled (plastic lined) in some places, composted (wax lined) in others, or sent straight to the landfill. The fate of your event’s cups will depend on the requirements of the mill or composter in your area.

Having all your recovery efforts go down the drain (or literally to the landfill) because materials were not prepared in an acceptable manner is a sure way to kill your recovery efforts. Proper planning and good communication, however, will go a long way in ensuring that materials you have spent so much time and effort recovering end up where you intend, not in a landfill.

9. Convey the information you have gathered to your volunteers.

You should schedule at least one volunteer training session prior to the event to go over the details of your recovery effort. That meeting should be followed on the day of the event with a “refresher” meeting so that everyone involved with the waste recovery effort knows what their duties are.

All event volunteers should be familiar with what is being recycled and/or composted and where the recycle bins/stations are located. Designate the areas with color-coded,

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elevated signage (Heatsheets, finishers' T-shirts, baggage recovery, family reunion, and so on), not just waste recovery stations.



Photo courtesy of Gia Grant, SF Clean City Coalition

10. Meet with vendors prior to the event.

This is a good time to educate your vendors about your event's green efforts and enlist them as partners. Learning what materials they plan to use at the event, (plastic cups or paper, compostable dishes or durable ware, plastic or compostable spoons, and so on) helps you with your recovery planning efforts. Take samples of the materials to your recycler for evaluation and possible suggestions for alternative materials.

11. Set goals.

If you know the recovery numbers from last year, set a goal of diverting X% more for this year. Goals should be expressed in absolute pounds, or in pounds (or fraction thereof) per participant.

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SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RECYCLING HEATSHEETS

- 1. In many areas, Heatsheets and other film plastics cannot be recycled at home (curbside).**

There is a big difference between recyclable, which Heatsheets are, and easily recycled, which Heatsheets and other film plastics may not be. The ease of recycling Heatsheets will depend largely upon the willingness of a plastics recycler to accept delivery of recovered Heatsheets.

Locate plastics recyclers in your area, then, contact them to confirm that they will accept shipment of recycled LDPE from you. You may need to show them a sample of a Heatsheets blanket before they will agree to accept them.

- 2. Assign collection points appropriately.**

Appropriate locations for collecting Heatsheets include the area where participants pick up clothing they checked before the race, as well as all "natural" exit points from the finish area. In addition, providing collection points at race hotels and specialty retail outlets may prove particularly useful on days when inclement weather leads race participants to wear their Heatsheets "home."

Wherever you put them, Heatsheets collection bins should not be isolated from the other recycling and trash bins or compostable bins (if used). Doing so invites people to throw whatever they have in their hands into the Heatsheets collection bin, thus contaminating the process.

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Clusters work better than standalones

- 3. Tell finishers as you wrap them in a Heatsheets blanket that it can be recycled, and where the collection areas are.**

Verbal and visual reminders are key to any successful waste recovery effort. Effective signage and frequent announcements builds awareness among participants. You cannot communicate this information too many times.

- 4. Find out from your recycler if Heatsheets must be separated from other recyclables.**

If this is the case, assign a team to collect the Heatsheets and stuff them into large clear plastic bags. If you carefully compress the Heatsheets periodically as you bag them, the space required to ship them will be greatly reduced.

Check with your recycler to see if these bags of Heatsheets can be mixed with other recyclables.

EVENT SETUP

- 1. On race day, have every recycling/trash location staffed with at least one trained and enthusiastic volunteer to ensure that materials are placed in the proper receptacles.**

Volunteers can't be shy about letting participants know which container materials should be placed in. Standing by silently as garbage is put into the recycling container is a sure way to ruin a recovery program.

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Participants are understandably tired at the conclusion of an event and are sometimes just looking to “get rid” of an item in their hand. But they are willing to take direction if offered in a pleasant and helpful manner.



Photo courtesy of ReSporting.org

- 2. Don't place waste recovery stations alongside barricades that separate spectators from participants.** Doing so just invites spectators to throw whatever they have in their hands into the closest bin.

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3. **Mark each garbage/recycling station with large signs that are high enough to be seen over the crowd. Make sure all signs are two-sided, so participants approaching the waste recovery stations from any direction get the message.**

Place signs on the individual containers, but don't forget to have signage on the top of the containers or up in the air. It is not unusual in crowded conditions for the signs on the sides of containers to be blocked by groups of participants.

4. **Have volunteers empty containers regularly during the event.**

Lining the containers with plastic bags will help (black for trash, clear for recyclables, bio-bags for composting). Assign a crew to circulate among the stations emptying containers and transferring the materials to the staging area before they over-flow.

5. **At large events, create a staging area where you can take garbage and recycling containers as they fill up. Get agreement from your service provider about the location of these areas, and make sure they are not located where the participants might gather.**

Place dumpsters (or drop boxes) in this area, clearly marked for the materials you are collecting. Depending on the amount of commingling (mixing) of recyclables your service provider allows, you may be able to put all your recycling together in one drop box.

Every container in the staging area should be labeled. For example, "Garbage Only", "Cardboard", "Recycling", or "Composting"—whatever fits best with the recycling plan you have worked out with your recycler. Make sure the volunteers will know where to place the materials that have been collected.

DURING THE EVENT

- **Start building awareness for your waste recovery efforts at the expo or packet pickup area.** Frequent, scripted announcements (15 seconds or less) and a demo waste recovery station will help ensure that participants will look for recycling/garbage stations on race day.
- **Monitor the recycling/garbage stations** to check for contamination and to be certain that the volunteers stationed there understand what materials go into which container.

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- **Set up and use the identical recycling station sets at the expo** to get your participants familiar with what to look for.
- **Make regular announcements over the finish line and awards stage PA** reminding participants of your event's recycling efforts.
- **Provide recycling guidelines to your vendors** and request they submit a recycling plan for their products that is consistent with your guidelines.
- **Visit your vendors to check that they are properly recycling materials** from their locations, and that they are using the containers agreed upon during your planning meeting with them.
- **Check with your service provider(s) to verify pickup schedule.** If pickup of the various containers is after the event (the next day), ensure that all containers are secure so materials can't be removed and recycling containers can't be contaminated overnight.
- **Be flexible.** Alter your collection plan based on near-term weather forecasts.
- **Take pictures.** Use a digital camera to document how you set up the recycling stations. Taking pictures during the event, showing things are going (good and bad) will help with planning for next year's event. Are there large crowds of participants gathering where no garbage/recycling collection is located? Are your overhead signs readily visible even with lots of people standing near them? Are there enough volunteers at each station? Do the recycling containers have any contamination in them? Are there recycling materials in the garbage containers? Photo documentation will assist in improving your efforts the next time.

POST-EVENT

1. **Meet with your service provider(s) the next day (if possible) to go over their impressions of how things went.**

In your pre-event planning meeting with them, ask them to take pictures of the materials as they are emptied from their trucks. Both garbage and recycling loads should be photographed so you can see what the material looked like when delivered. The pictures will help you see if any corrections need to be made for your next event. They also provide great pictorial stories for presentations to community leaders, the press, and for your web site.

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2. Have your service provider(s) “grade” your efforts.

Was the recyclable material delivered in clear bags? Were materials placed in the proper containers? Was there a significant amount of recyclable material in the garbage? Was there a lot of garbage in the recycling? Looking at photographs with your service provider will help answer these questions.

3. Get weights of material transported by your service provider(s) and calculate your recovery percentage. (Pounds recovered) divided by (pounds put in landfill + pounds recovered) = recovery %.

Did you meet the goals set prior to the event? If yes, then it's time to celebrate. Then, plan how to do even better. If not, then work with your service provider(s) to find areas where you can improve.

4. Meet with your key volunteers and thank them for their efforts.

Share your results with them (good or bad) and enlist their help in developing solutions. Use this information as a motivator for the future.

5. Let key stakeholders know of your successes (and shortcomings).

Race participants, local officials and the media should all be kept abreast of your accomplishments. After all, community events have an impact on the communities that host them, and community members should know that you are doing your best to limit the environmental impact of your event.

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GREEN EVENT AND WASTE MANAGEMENT RESOURCES

American Chemistry Council: provides a recycled plastics markets database at http://www.americanchemistry.com/s_plastics/sec_rpmd.asp?CID=1591&DID=6053.

Consolidated Container Company LLC: provides recycling services for a wide variety of materials through a network of nationwide service providers at <http://www.containerexperts.com>.

Council for Responsible Sport: provides an independent, comprehensive certification for sustainable athletic events at <http://www.resport.org/index.html>.

Eco-Logistics: worked with AFMInc on its Heatsheets recycling pilot program and produced this guide. The predecessor to this guide is *A Guide to Recycling and Reducing Waste at Komen Race For The Cure® Events*, developed by Robin Hawley in 2002. The Race For The Cure recycling guide can be downloaded at: <http://www.eco-logistics.biz/2008/03/23/recycling-resource-guide/>.

Recycle on the Go: an EPA initiative to encourage recycling in public places and at special events. Learn more at <http://www.epa.gov/epawaste/conservation/rrr/rogo/index.htm>.

Keep America Beautiful: in partnership with Earth911.com, offers a Web tool for locating recyclers at <http://www.kab.org/site/PageServer?pagename=index>.