

College gets rid of ozone reducing cups

By Allison Looney

The College will no longer purchase polystyrene foam cups and plates on the advice of the Middlebury College Environmental Quality organization and the state of Vermont. In the campus-wide mailing dated September 25, President Olin Robison cited the fact that such products are not biodegradable, which burdens the state's landfills, and that the production process of polystyrene items harms the ozone layer of the earth.

Chlorofluorocarbons, used to produce polystyrene foam, have been linked to destruction of the ozone layer, which protects the earth from cancer-causing ultraviolet radiation. An Oct. 1 article in the New York Times reported that the thinning of the ozone layer over Antarctica, which occurs seasonally, was 50 percent last year, the greatest it's been in the ten years that measurements have been taken. Though the situation over Antarctica is extreme due to the effects of the harsh climate, the level of

chlorofluorocarbons elsewhere is probably similar because they remain in the air up to 250 years.

The amount of chlorine in the Antarctic atmosphere currently is twice what it was in 1975. It is hypothesized that chlorine from chlorofluorocarbons is reacting with ozone and destroying it. This is much more noticeable in the Antarctic because of low temperatures there, which reduce the amount of nitrogen in the air. Nitrogen tends to bind with chlorine, lessening its oppor-

tunities to destroy ozone.

The disposal of polystyrene foam products is also a problem. Polystyrene is a polymer of styrene (C₈H₈); as such, it has "enormous" molecules, according to Chemistry Professor Jeff Byers. This means that it has a "very, very stable," quality which makes it durable under rough treatment, such as exposure to hot liquids, but which also means that "you put it in the ground and nothing will happen to it." This situation is true of all plastics, including plastic tableware and bags. Chemistry Professor Edwin Pool pointed out that plastic foam cannot be incinerated because of toxic fumes that would result.

EQ had been working on persuading the college to discontinue the use of polystyrene foam items since last spring, but found former Food Service head Gary Starr "unreceptive," according to EQ President Leslie Virostek. But some members of the administration, such as Dean Erica Wonnacott, Chaplain John Walsh, and Director of Residential Life Frank Kelley were supportive of EQ's aims. Of the new policy, Wonnacott said it "may not make a huge dent," but "I think it is significant." She also referred to the plans of Vermont's state offices and the McDonald's Corporation to phase out use of polystyrene foam containers.

EQ's perspective prevailed, which came as a surprise to Virostek, in light of the resistance EQ had en-

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countered last year. Virostek was notified a few weeks ago of the new policy, but prior to it EQ had been planning a comprehensive campaign for this year to eliminate plastic foam from the campus. Virostek hopes that this change in policy means that the college is becoming "more environmentally aware." She also hopes to use this decision as a "springboard" toward similar improvements, such as the college taking more responsibility for recycling.

The state of Vermont has banned the use of polystyrene foam cups, plates, and bowls in state offices and institutions, because of their harmful effects on the ozone layer and their nonbiodegradable nature, which overtaxes landfills. The state hopes the private industry will follow its lead.

This new policy will cost the state roughly an additional \$13,300 dollars, according to a September 13 article in the New York Times, because paper products are twice as expensive as those made of polystyrene. This article also said that, according to manufacturers of plastic foam, the largest offenders against the ozone layer are refrigeration, air-conditioning, and the computer industry.
