



## RecycleMania Hindered by State Farm Center Vendors

While the Fighting Illini battled Nebraska on the State Farm Center court, volunteers fought a very different battle off of it - recycling the waste generated by the fans.

As part of Recyclemania, a nationwide competition to reduce landfill waste by promoting recycling, the Fighting Illini basketball



By Jess Tang

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game against the University of Nebraska was transformed into a massive awareness event.

It was no doubt a great win for Illinois; they broke the Cornhuskers' seven game winning streak. The RecycleMania effort was also successful, resulting in over 31 percent of the waste generated at the game being diverted from landfills into recycling bags. As a volunteer at the event, I had the chance to talk to many game-goers who were nothing but enthusiastic about the effort to reduce waste. State Farm Center food vendors also supported the cause and spoke out that the event was working towards something very positive. However, when I looked into the disposable food containers that they were providing customers, I realized how much more waste could have reduced.

Roughly a quarter of the food, especially the ice cream, was sold on Styrofoam bowls and plates. Styrofoam and products like it are made from petroleum byproducts and utilize the carcinogenic chemical benzene during production. In addition, it does not decompose and can last for over one million years if left to sit in a landfill. While there are ways to recycle the product, the University does not offer options for alternative disposal of Styrofoam. Unfortunately, it all ended up in a landfill garbage can.

Likewise, the RecycleMania team was not able to recycle a good portion of the plastic waste generated because it was made from polypropylene, called plastic #5 on the bottom of drink and popcorn containers. Only 28 percent of the major recycling companies in the U.S. are actually able to recycle this product.

So, sadly, these bottles made their way to the landfill as well.

Lastly, while paper is usually very easily recycled, not much can be said for it once the paper container has held food. Once recyclable materials are soiled with food, they are no longer recyclable because the material is no longer pure or clean enough to go through processing. Consequently, all of the large popcorn boxes were dumped.

As a volunteer attempting to guide game-goers towards sustainable waste disposal, it was frustrating to repeatedly tell them that their plastic and paper containers could not actually be recycled. Obviously, the intentions of the RecycleMania volunteers and coordinators were positive and environmentally conscious. It was the products they were presented to dispose of that caused so much more waste to end up in landfills.

Recycling is nowhere near as easy as making a pile of plastics and papers and a separate one of food. It requires a conscious decision from consumers and vendors as well to act more responsibly on the retail side of the effort.

Bart Bartels, the University's Zero Waste Coordinator, and various environmental groups on campus still hold a positive attitude and are determined as they look forward to their next project: the campus-wide electronic recycling event, E-cycleMania.

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