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## Coke set to open JV PET recycling plant

By [Mike Verespej](#) | PLASTICS NEWS STAFF

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SPARTANBURG, S.C. (Jan. 16, 9:55 a.m. ET) -- Coca-Cola Co. plans to boost the recycled content of its PET bottles to 10 percent by the end of 2010, thanks in part to its new joint-venture recycling plant in Spartanburg.

"This Spartanburg plant has sufficient output to meet that demand," said Scott Vitters, director of sustainable packaging for Atlanta-based Coca-Cola. All of the new plant's output will be aimed at producing new bottles, Vitters said.

"From a recycled content standpoint, we are focused on sustaining 10 percent recycled content by 2010 and 25 percent by 2015 to improve the environmental sustainability of our packaging," Vitters said. Coke achieved 10 percent recycled content in North America in 2004 and 2005, but since then the level has slipped to 3 percent or less.

"From a cost perspective, our focus is to continue to remain on a parity level or better" with virgin PET resin, Vitters said. "Long-term, we would like to invest in additional capacity at Spartanburg and in additional plants."

The plant, under construction for 18 months, will open Feb. 1. Coke invested between \$45 million and \$50 million in the project, including a loan and an equity stake. The plant, named New United Resource Recovery Corp. LLC, is a joint venture with Spartanburg-based recycler United Resource Recovery Corp. LLC.

Initially the plant will have capacity to recycle 56 million pounds of food-grade PET annually, with another 44 million pounds coming online by the end of this year or early 2010, when a second recycling line starts production.

The Spartanburg plant will operate around-the-clock and employ 65 starting Feb. 1, with an employment of 100 when the second line becomes operational, said URRC Vice President Gerry Fishbeck.

When completed, it is expected to be the largest PET recycling plant in the world that makes food-grade resin. Coca-Cola has similar investments in plants using URRC's Hybrid unPET technology for chemically cleaning PET flake in Mexico, France, Austria, Switzerland and the Philippines. URRC technology is also used in plants in Germany and the United Kingdom.

The plant will purchase virtually all of its raw materials on the open market, with 98 percent from curbside recycling programs.

"We will get our material where it is the most economical," said URRC President and Chief Executive Officer Carlos Gutierrez in an interview at a Jan. 14 opening ceremony in Spartanburg.

Coke does not plan to buy all of the plant's output.

"The commitment we have is that at 50-60 percent of what we make will go to Coca-Cola," Gutierrez said. NURRC is in talks with blow molders — Graham Packaging Co. LP, Southeastern Container Inc. and Amcor PET Packaging — to purchase the remaining output, he said.

The new food-grade line and the one that will start up in about a year will process clear material, each with a capacity to produce 44 million pounds of crystallized PET chips annually. The original line, built for development purposes, will process mixed colors and have a 12 million pound-per-year capacity. There is a separate sort-and-grind operation.

Jeff Seabright, Coke's vice president of environmental and water resources, said the Spartanburg plant is modeled after a Toluca, Mexico, food-grade PET recycling plant built in 2005 that was also a Coca-Cola investment.

The Spartanburg plant offers several improvements in technology over facilities that use the Hybrid UnPET process, Fishbeck said.

"The technology for bale sorting [in Spartanburg] is probably the latest out there," and is based on the concept of positive sorting. The technology looks for PET and separates it from other materials, as opposed to other technologies that "remove things they don't want. We remove what we want."

The NURRC plant also uses a laser, near-infrared sorting machine that takes 160,000 readings

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per second and can examine each flake to remove contaminants. The Powersort 100 was developed by Coca-Cola and Unisensor Sensorsysteme GmbH in Karlsruhe, Germany.

"It is critical to get the flake significantly more clean in order to make it suitable for food-grade applications," Fishbeck said.

Other technologies at NURRC include a dry system of recycling that eliminates the need to pre-wash bottles, developed by B+B Anlagenbau GmbH of Tönisvorst, Germany, and a dry roasting process to remove moisture that negates the need to use melt filtration to eliminate contaminants.

"We don't melt the stuff, which just typically degrades the product and makes it worse and causes it to lose some of its characteristics," Fishbeck said.

In addition, he said NURCC "doesn't have to boil water or use other detergents" to eliminate contaminants. Both of those technology differences keep operating, energy and water costs down. "At the end of the day, the crystallized chip we make is a commodity and it has to compete with virgin," he said.

Separately, Coca-Cola said it began a multi-million dollar promotional TV, print and online advertising campaign called Give It Back on Jan. 13 designed to give leave 1 billion impressions with consumer to recycle.

In addition, John Burgess, president and chief executive officer of Coca-Cola Recycling, said the company now has 30 recycling centers, up from seven at the end of 2007, at plants of Coca-Cola Enterprises Inc., which sells about 80 percent of the company's bottle and can volume in North America.

He said the company expects to open another five-to-10 in 2009, which should give them 100 percent coverage of its operations.

Last year, CCE plants collected upwards of 4 million pounds of pre-consumer waste—plastic, paperboard, shrink wrap, strapping and other materials, and he expects to collect 10 million pounds of material at those plants.

Burgess said the 30 recycling centers collected and acquired 250 million pound of materials that otherwise would have been waste, equally split between PET and aluminum. The goal for 2009, he said, is to collect 400 million pounds of material, equally split again between aluminum and PET.



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