

'Chasing Arrows' Symbol In Recycling Is Misleading On Plastics, E.P.A. Says

By CHANG CHE

Gary Anderson was a 23-year-old architecture student at the University of Southern California in Los Angeles in 1970, when he entered a design contest sponsored by a box manufacturer for a logo to promote the recycling of paper.

He won, spawning a symbol that became international shorthand for repurposing waste materials.

His design: three folded-over arrow strips, chasing each other in an endless triangle.

It wasn't until the end of the decade that Mr. Anderson, now 75, saw his creation "take on a life of its own," beyond his \$2,500 prize earnings, he said in a phone interview last week. He recalled walking along a sidewalk in Amsterdam one day, turning a corner onto a neighborhood square to see a clutch of recycling bins stamped with his design.

Since then, manufacturers have put the logo on all types of products, not just paper items like cereal boxes and shopping bags.

"The symbol and I had different lives for a time," said Mr. Anderson, a retired architecture and planning consultant in Baltimore, but he came to nurture a "pride of authorship."

Now the environmental agency that oversees recycling efforts in the United States is saying that, after close to five decades in the public eye, the "chasing arrows" logo should be retired from plastics that are difficult to recycle.

The Environmental Protection Agency asked the Federal Trade Commission in April to substitute the arrows logo on plastics with solid triangles, a decision that the agency believes could help clear up confusion around labeling. The goal is to relieve recycling facilities of the burden of dealing with plastic items that they cannot process.

Consumers have long treated the chasing-arrows logo as an indication that an item can be recycled,

A logo's designer agrees that it has been misused.

wrote Jennie Romer, a deputy assistant administrator at the Environmental Protection Agency, in an April letter to the F.T.C.

But when it comes to plastics that can be "deceptive and misleading," Ms. Romer wrote. Manufacturers often pair the iconic logo with a resin identification code, with numbers from 1 to 7 that indicate the type of plastic in the product.

"Not all resin codes can be recycled currently in the United States," she wrote. Many plastics, especially those numbered from 3 to 7, "are not financially viable to recycle."

Mr. Anderson agreed that the symbol he created was not meant to be used that way. But he also hoped the logo could retain its status as a ubiquitous symbol of recycling for other purposes.

"I do see their point," Mr. Anderson said. "It was meant to be an overarching symbol to say, 'Hey, this is recycled, this has been recycled or it's something you can recycle.' That's what it was supposed to be."

More than a thousand environmental groups and individuals, along with the E.P.A., sent comments to the Federal Trade Commission from December to April, arguing, among other points, that the misuse of the recycling logo in plastic products may be contributing to a growing plastic-waste crisis.

Roughly 5 percent to 6 percent of plastic in the United States was recycled in 2021, a drop from 9.5 percent in 2014, according to a 2022 study of recycling facilities by Greenpeace, an environmental advocacy organization. Most types of plastic packaging were "economically impossible to recycle," partly because of the costs associated with collecting and sorting them, and could remain so in the future, researchers found.

The F.T.C. said in December that it was seeking public comment on changes to its environmental advertising and labeling regulations, known as the Green Guides. Last revised in 2012, the guides are meant to protect consumers from companies that make false claims about their efforts to protect the environment.

Since then, the problem of how to handle plastic waste has intensified. One contributing factor, the E.P.A. said, was a 2018 policy shift in China, which used to take millions of tons of American plastic waste. It cut off low-grade plastic imports in an effort to cleanse itself of "foreign garbage."

Without effective plastic recycling, the labels have come to do more harm than good, said John Hocevar, oceans campaign director at Greenpeace U.S.A.

"I've had the worst, most depressing conversations with people about this stuff," Mr. Hocevar said. "Your average person wants to do the right thing. They look at the stuff that they bought from the store, they see recycling symbols on it and they put it in the recycling bin."

But most of those items are not being recycled, Mr. Hocevar said. The waste overwhelms recycling centers instead, diverting effort away from paper, aluminum and glass items that are easier to recycle.

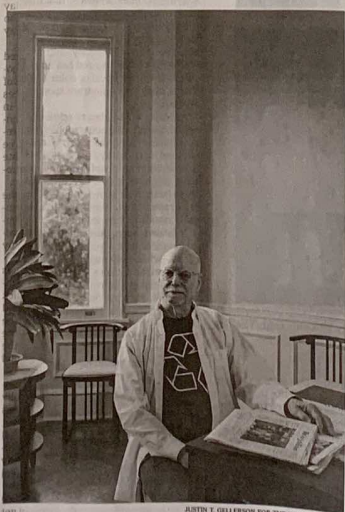
The labels also contribute to a myth that recycling is a solution to the alarming rise of plastic waste, Mr. Hocevar added.

The Environmental Protection Agency is not asking to ditch Mr. Anderson's logo in its entirety, Ms. Romer said in a phone interview last week. But companies that use the symbol should have to "meet a very high bar."

For a product to qualify to be advertised as recyclable, the Federal Trade Commission requires that at least 60 percent of the company's customers have access to recycling facilities where it can be processed. The E.P.A. has asked the F.T.C. to raise that threshold "much higher."

While Mr. Anderson shares the concerns, he is skeptical about efforts to create alternatives to his logo, which he said had arisen from a mix of his fascinations with the printing press, the logic-defying art of M.C. Escher and the Möbius strip, a one-sided geometric shape that loops on itself.

"Good graphics are beautifully simple, and they also work," he said. "They convey the concepts that need to be conveyed without having to be explained."



Justin T. Gellerson for The New York Times
"Good graphics are beautifully simple," said Gary Anderson, who won a design contest in 1970 for a logo to promote paper recycling.