Fast-food brands make an effort to cut down on plastic

Globally, we produce nearly 300 million tons of plastic waste every year, and an estimated eight million of it ends up in the world's oceans. A fair number of those items are disposable plastic packaging and cutlery used in fast-food restaurants.

A concerted push from environmentalists and conscientious consumers has forced big chains to grapple with their use of plastic, and some have found new ways to address the problem.

A&W Canada, for example, pledged their commitment last year to eliminating plastic straws by investing in paper ones. They're produced by a company called Aardvark, which says their straws are 100 per cent biodegradable, compostable and sustainably sourced. A&W said the switch to paper will keep 82 million plastic straws out of landfills every year.

Last summer, Starbucks joined the movement to ban plastic straws, but their approach was: Why use straws at all?

The coffee chain said that by 2020, it will replace straws for most of their iced drinks.
with a recyclable strawless lid that is shaped like a child's sippy cup (above). Starbucks says the lid shape will make it easy to sort and recycle, unlike plastic straws, which generally end up in landfills.

Megan Byers, a plastic reduction expert at the U.S.-based Product Stewardship Institute, thinks the initiatives taken by these fast-food restaurants are a "good first step."

"I understand the challenges that fast-food restaurants face in reducing disposables in the midst of our on-the-go convenience culture, but ... there is always something that can be done to reduce the plastic footprint."

Ikea, which is primarily a furniture retailer but also has a very popular cafeteria, has promised to go even further in phasing out single-use plastic items by the end of this year. Instead of investing in novel alternatives, IKEA has opted for a more old-school idea: glass cups, porcelain mugs and plates, as well as metal cutlery.

"Many fast-food restaurants offer tables where customers can consume their meals. In those cases, trying out reusable options like trays, plates, cutlery, cups, et cetera, makes a lot of sense," said Byers.

She said that a plastic reduction plan for a major fast-food chain "comes about over time." The first step to making a big difference is to "eliminate what you don't need, reuse what you can."

— Farhnaz Fazli

What's on your mind?

Responding to Emily Chung's piece last week on right to repair in Canada, email writers seemed largely in favour of unlocking the restrictions many gadget makers put on fixing their products.

This thoughtful note from one reader spoke to a larger issue: "I think the more glaring problem with today's throw-away society is that manufacturers have been allowed to sell products with very low life expectancy. Whether it's cars, computers or household appliances, they are rarely made with long-term quality and reliability in mind anymore. This design mentality contributes to more garbage, just like single-use plastic packaging."

Email us at whatonearth@cbc.ca.

Amazon has a greener shipping option — will people buy in?