Dell Packaging Made from Recycled Ocean Plastics, an IT Industry First
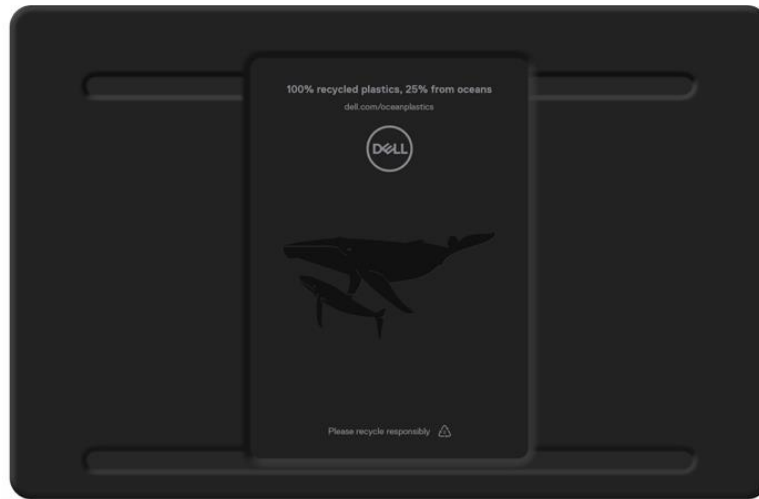
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By Jessica Lyons Hardcastle

Dell is the latest company to turn ocean plastics into new products and packaging as businesses increasingly address the problem of plastic waste — and see potential in creating circular supply chains and using recycled materials.

Dell today said it has developed the technology industry's first packaging trays made with 25 percent recycled ocean plastic content. It is part of Dell's goal of 100 percent sustainable packaging by 2020 and is a response to the growing environmental problem of plastics in the oceans.

It also follows a slate of recent announcements from companies turning ocean plastics into new products and packaging.

Last month Procter & Gamble, in partnership with recycling and environmental management companies TerraCycle and Suez, developed the world's first recyclable shampoo bottle made from up to 25 percent recycled beach plastic.

Also in January Unilever CEO Paul Polman called on the consumer goods industry to address ocean plastic waste and employ circular economy models to increase plastic recycling rates.

Additionally, Adidas is working to solve the problem of plastic pollution in oceans by turning this waste stream into new material for its shoes.

Dell's new packaging consists of recycled plastics collected from waterways and beaches. The company will start shipping its new laptop in the ocean plastics packaging on April 30. In 2017, Dell says its ocean plastics pilot will keep 16,000 pounds of plastic from entering the ocean.

Additionally, each tray will be stamped with the No. 2 recycling symbol, designating it as HDPE, which is commonly recyclable in many locations. Dell's packaging team designs and sources its product packaging to be more than 93 percent recyclable by weight so that it can be reused as part of the circular economy.

The ocean plastics supply chain process works like this: Dell's partners intercept ocean plastics at the source in waterways, shorelines and beaches before it reaches the ocean. It then processes and refines the used plastics, mixes the ocean plastic (25 percent) with other recycled HDPE plastics (the remaining 75 percent) from sources like bottles and food storage containers. Finally, it molds the resulting recycled plastic flake into new packaging trays and ship the trays for final packaging and customer delivery.

Dell's pilot program, which the company says is also an industry-first, follows a successful feasibility study launched March 2016 in Haiti.

Since 2008, Dell has included post-consumer recycled plastics in its desktops, and as of January, reached its 2020 goal of using 50 million pounds of recycled materials in its products.

In an earlier interview, Scott O'Connell, Dell's director of environmental affairs, said using recycled plastics saves the company money as well as reducing its environmental impacts. "We've been able to show a slight cost reduction from closed-loop plastics compared to other types of plastics that are out there, and we think with scale and volume that will continue to be the case," he said.

The company has increasingly focused on creating a circular approach — where waste-stream materials can be used as inputs into products and packaging. Dell was the first, and so far, the only, IT firm to produce computers and monitors that contain e-waste plastics and recycled carbon fiber.
Dell has also published a white paper on sourcing strategies and says it plans to convene a cross-industry working group that will address ocean plastics on a global scale.

"This new packaging initiative demonstrates that there are real global business applications for ocean plastics that deliver positive results for our business and planet," said Kevin Brown, chief supply chain officer at Dell, in a statement. "We look forward to working across industries for broader impact."