

THE SHRINKWRAP DILEMMA

We feel a pang of guilt each spring as the plastic wrap is peeled off our boats, bound for a dumpster. Other (limited) options exist. Let's discuss them



For those of us who've ditched single-use plastic shopping bags, straws, and beverage containers, it may feel wasteful to wrap our boats in a cocoon of shrinkwrap every fall. It takes, on average, 20 pounds of plastic to wrap a 20-foot boat, according to Max Kraimer, program manager at the Rhode Island nonprofit Clean Ocean Access. That's the equivalent of 1,730 grocery bags!

Even more worrisome is the fact that most shrinkwrap – even the stuff you think you're recycling – ends up in the landfill.

"You can't just recycle this stuff," says Donna Morrow, program manager at the Maryland Department of Natural Resources. "It has bands and straps to tie everything down, zippers for doors, vents

to allow air to escape. All of those items are made of different materials than the wrap itself and must be cut out for the wrap to be recycled."

That designated dumpster for shrinkwrap at your marina? There's no guarantee that the contents will be recycled, especially if the wrap hasn't been prepared properly. "Marinas with good intentions

order a 'shrinkwrap dumpster,' and it all goes to the landfill anyway," says Morrow.

Several groups are tackling the problem with boat shrinkwrap collection programs. The Rhode Island Marine Trades Association (RIMTA) was one of the first organizations to launch a successful shrinkwrap collection program. In 13 years, it has grown to 55 participating boatyards and marinas and has diverted hundreds of thousands of pounds of shrinkwrap from landfills.

"We sell boatyards and marinas big plastic bags to put their shrinkwrap in," says Jen Huber, vice president of operations at RIMTA. The bags (which are recycled with the shrinkwrap) currently cost \$12 each, which covers the delivery and pickup costs. "In the fall and spring, we partner with a recycling business called PF Trading, which picks it up for us." Other groups, like the Marine

Trades Association of Maryland (mtam.org), offer similar programs.

Once collected, the shrinkwrap goes to a facility to be baled and sold on to recyclers in the United States. Clean Ocean Access is one of the organizations that buys these plastic bales (via grants) to organize the next stage of processing.

“Since January 2020 we’ve collected 292,474 pounds of shrinkwrap and partnered with TerraCycle in New Jersey to process the material,” says Max Kraimer, COA program manager. “Working with TerraCycle, we turn New England shrinkwrap into a resin that’s sold into the U.S. plastic supply.”

Post-consumer resin goes on to be manufactured into plastic garbage bags, flexible packaging, and food containers, or “downcycled” into products like composite wood. This reduces the new plastic being made and, instead, recycles and reuses plastic that otherwise would have ended up in the landfill.

This sounds like a simple solution, but it’s not, explains [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] an escape of recycling as changed so much. The demand has changed, and it doesn’t have the same value it used to.”

One of COA’s goals is to create a “circular economy” for shrinkwrap, where existing plastic resources can be reused in perpetuity. “In the future, we imagine a closed-loop system that uses the previous year’s shrinkwrap to feed into the production of next year’s shrinkwrap,” says Kraimer. “Today, boaters don’t yet have the option to buy shrinkwrap that contains recycled content.”

‘Think before you shrink’

The [REDACTED] coined the catchy slogan, which is now being used by several shrinkwrap recycling programs. Until there are more widespread solutions, there are a few options that can lessen the burden on the environment (and your wallet). Here are some alternatives to covering your boat with single-use shrinkwrap every fall:

» **No cover.** This may be the best option from an environmental perspective but it isn’t necessarily practical or good practice. Covers are crucial in many parts of the country to keep boats clean and dry, and prevent UV deterioration. Not

using one could result in boat damage. Some marinas require boats staying in the yard over winter to be shrinkwrapped, especially if the boat is kept in an outdoor storage rack. This helps ensure a rack doesn’t collapse from the weight of water possibly collecting in the boats.

» **Reuse your shrinkwrap.** Some cost-savvy boaters opt to reuse their shrinkwrap, often getting three to five years out of a single wrap and saving thousands of dollars in the process. It may even be a more environmentally friendly option



Shrinkwrap collection programs

» Ask your marina or boatyard about where to recycle your shrinkwrap.

They’ll likely be able to help, especially if they participate in your state’s Clean Marina program.

» Ask your shrinkwrap installer if the company offers recycling services.

» Contact your local recycling center or landfill and ask if they accept shrinkwrap for recycling.

» Ask if sustainable shrinkwrap is available. No. 4 LPDE shrink film can be converted into renewable and sustainable energy, and there are 654 modern landfill projects in the U.S. that accept it.

» Search online for boat shrinkwrap drop-off locations in your area.

than buying a reusable cover.

“[Most] covers, except for cotton, are made from plastic materials,” says Kraimer. “Oftentimes they’re made from a mix of plastic that had to go through several processes to become the fibers and materials used in reusable covers.”

On the other hand, shrinkwrap, which is low-density polyethylene (LDPE), is made from natural gas. “It’s directly fracked and turned into plastic,” explains Kraimer. As a result, reusing shrinkwrap (i.e., only replacing it every few years) will

produce less carbon than producing a reusable cover.



To remove your shrinkwrap with the intent of reusing it, on a dry day with a dry cover, make an incision in the plastic at the stern to loosen the back of the cover, then carefully roll it forward and off the boat. Remember to tie messenger lines where you’ve had to cut any cinching lines in the band around the boat, so you can tie them back together next season. Take pictures at every step to remember where everything fits back together, including the wood frame and padding, so you’ll be ready to re-cover the boat in the fall. Next season, all you’ll need is a roll of strong, wide white shrinkwrap tape to reseal the seams you opened.

» **Recycle your shrinkwrap.** If you find yourself sitting on a bunch of used shrinkwrap this spring, look for a shrinkwrap collection program in your area (see “Shrinkwrap Collection Programs” at left). Once you’ve found one, carefully read their requirements. Most will ask you to remove all non-shrinkwrap material including wooden supports, zippers, doors, and rope and dispose of them separately. It’s also important to keep the shrinkwrap clean and dry, removing any mud, rainwater, or leaves.

Individual programs may have specific instructions, but often the easiest way to remove shrinkwrap destined for recycling is to cut just above the band along the perimeter of the boat, separating the string from the plastic. After ensuring the material is dry and cleaned of dirt, fold the shrinkwrap into 4- or 5-foot lengths, roll it up, and tie it in a bundle with a length of shrinkwrap (don’t use string).

» **Buy a reusable boat cover.** They aren’t as expensive as you might think. There are four boat-cover options: custom, semicustom, generic, and tarps.

A custom cover will fit a specific boat and may be designed and installed by a professional. It’s a more expensive alternative to single-use shrinkwrap and you’ll need to properly maintain and store it, but the benefits are a tight fit, durable

materials, and custom features like vents and zippers. A survey done by last year found they range anywhere from \$62–\$250 per square foot.

Semicustom covers are available in a range of sizes, profiles, and price points and are made for specific boat makes and models. While not as tailored as custom covers, semicustom covers are a lot more affordable, sometimes costing only marginally more than a single application of shrinkwrap. Prices range from around \$15–\$79 per square foot.



Generic covers are sold based on length and width. One model fits a wider range of boats, but they often require more work to ensure proper fit. They range around \$9–\$17 per square foot.

Tarps are inexpensive and will fit a broad range of shapes and sizes. However, polyethylene tarps usually have a short life and are prone to leaking at wear points, resulting in frequent replacement. You're looking at around \$5–\$6 per square foot.

In all cases, the key to making reusable boat covers a friendly option is to install and support them well, and extend their life with proper cleaning and maintenance. While some manufacturer warranties cover generic or semicustom covers up to 10 years, custom covers might have an even longer lifespan. One downside is that most reusable covers are made from virgin materials and are not recyclable.

No single solution

"There's no single answer to every environmental issue," says [REDACTED]. "What works in one place, doesn't necessarily work in others." She stresses that there needs to be a "suite of options" available to boaters when it comes to dealing with shrinkwrap. Those might include innovation, evaluating options, elevating the conversation, and looking to other industries for possible solutions.

A SEA OF PLASTIC

The plastic problem isn't unique to boating. Mounting consumption, aggressive plastic-industry lobbyists, and broken economics in the recycling industry have made it so most plastics in the U.S. end up in the incinerator or landfill. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, in the last 40 years, less than 10% of plastic waste was recycled in the U.S.

"There are a lot of organizations doing great work," says [REDACTED]. She says that the [REDACTED] has been focused on connecting leaders who are working on this issue. "[REDACTED] staff sit on industry boards and partner with more than 1,000 organizations and agencies across all 50 states." [REDACTED] has developed partnerships with organizations like the NOAA Marine Debris Program, states like Maryland and Ohio that have successful programs, as well as individual groups like RIMTA and COA, to help tackle the issue.

"We're working on this issue in every state," says [REDACTED]. "We have waste. It's important and necessary to talk about what to do with it as an industry."