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Environmental Damage by the McMIndes Cafeteria

At the McMIndes cafeteria at Fort Hays State University, thousands of pieces of single-use products are being used and wasted every day. From styrofoam containers and cups to plastic forks and straws, single-use products made of plastic and styrofoam are dominantly used in the dining hall. The McMIndes cafeteria is the primary source of food for thousands of residential students at Fort Hays State University, and the irresponsibility of the dining hall to protect the environment can cause an enormous environmental impact. The overuse of single-use products made of plastic or styrofoam in the McMIndes dining hall is potentially causing devastating damage to the environment. Making more use of reusable utensils or using products made of more environmentally friendly materials can be an effective solution to mitigate the problem.

Plastic and styrofoam single-use products are used in every part of the McMIndes cafeteria. When students order food from the *Comfort* or the *Pasta* section, the dining hall staff puts the food into a styrofoam container, no questions asked. The staff also provides individually wrapped plastic forks, often without an option for a reusable one. In the *Grills* or the *International Cuisine* section, the food comes out pre-packaged inside a clear plastic container. When getting a drink from the soda fountain, students have no choice but to use the white styrofoam cup with the Pepsi logo on it. If students decide to pick up some sweets in the *Dessert* section, they are faced with snacks that are double wrapped individually with clear plastic wrap.

Finally, when the students leave the cafeteria, they encounter individually wrapped plastic straws, plastic soda cup lids, and individually wrapped toothpicks. As a result, a visitor typically ends up leaving with more than five pieces of plastic or styrofoam products every visit.

While that might sound like a few, the numbers add up significantly when the number of visitors to the dining hall is considered. Although it is not possible to find out the exact amount of waste generated, we can make a rough estimate. When I measured the mass of styrofoam containers, styrofoam cups, plastic forks, plastic straws, and plastic lids the dining hall provides, they added up to approximately 25 grams per set, or around 0.9 ounces. According to the FHSU official website, there are approximately 700 students residing in the McMIndes Hall and Custer Hall combined, and if we assume that they visit the cafeteria twice a day, then that would be roughly 9,800 visits per week. That is over 16,000 pounds of waste every year.

The problem with this is that although these plastic and styrofoam single-use products only serve their purpose for just a few minutes, their existence on Earth will be billions of times longer. Plastic and styrofoam are not biodegradable and therefore take a vast amount of time to decompose; scientists say that they take as long as a thousand years to fully decompose. This means that our planet would still be suffering from the non-compostable waste generated by the European Crusaders in the 11th century, and William Shakespeare's for another six hundred years, if they had plastic and styrofoam. For the millennium these waste are buried in the soil waiting to be decomposed, they can release toxic chemicals and contaminate the surrounding soil, which can then seep into nearby water sources and pollute them. This can potentially cause a devastating health impact on the species that consume water from these sources, including humans. Furthermore, sunlight exposure to styrofoam may release air pollutants that can harm

the ozone layer, a crucial component of the atmosphere that protects humans from the deadly ultraviolet radiation. These waste gives nothing but harm to humans.

Plastic and styrofoam garbage are also one of the worst serial killers on Earth. There are substantial amounts of plastic and styrofoam wastes on the ocean; there is even a plastic island in the Pacific Ocean seven times the size of Kansas. When a marine animal mistakes one of the so many pieces of waste as food and eats it, the waste can get stuck in the animal's throat and suffocate it or prevent it from digesting food so that it starves to death. The number of casualties caused by this is massive; it is estimated that these waste alone kills more than 100 million marine animals each year. That is almost double the number of human deaths in the same time frame.

“Why can't we recycle them?”—one might say. Unfortunately, while plastic and styrofoam can be recycled, they are much more difficult to recycle than other materials. They require special machinery to be recycled, and just a few local governments have the necessary equipment. After all, styrofoam or plastic items contaminated with food or drink are impossible to recycle, which makes recycling food containers pretty much pointless. The only way to save the Earth from plastic and styrofoam waste is to use less of them.

So what can the McMIndes dining hall do to generate less plastic and styrofoam waste? There is a simple and effective solution: using reusable products. Instead of using styrofoam containers and cups, the cafeteria could use reusable plates and cups. Instead of using plastic forks and spoons, the cafeteria could use reusable metal forks and spoons. Because these reusable utensils are semi-permanent, they can be used for years without generating any waste.

However, although using reusable products is the most environmentally friendly option of all, a complete transition may not be feasible. There are clear limitations to reusable products,

especially when used for takeout. Also, with increased sanitation concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the use of single-use products may be inevitable in some cases. A possible supplementing solution to this would be using single-use products that are made of more environmentally friendly materials, and paper is the number one candidate. Paper is biodegradable and takes significantly less time to decompose; while plastic and styrofoam take up to a thousand years, paper just needs around 2 to 6 weeks—that is up to 25,000 times shorter! Paper is also significantly less toxic when buried in the soil compared to other chemically generated man-made materials and therefore has a notably less environmental impact.

There is much room for the McMIndes dining hall to improve on their single-use products. First, the styrofoam takeout containers used to serve the main dishes can be replaced with compostable paper takeout containers. Second, plastic straws can be replaced with paper straws. Third, the plastic wrap packaging around cookies and other sweet treats can be replaced with paper bags. They will be able to provide the same convenience and comfort while minimizing the environmental impact.

To set these solutions in action, the first step necessary is informing the dining service provider, Chartwells, about the environmental concerns of the dining hall. Chartwells offers an online survey that can be participated simply by scanning the QR code displayed when exiting the cafeteria. Alternatively, these concerns can be addressed by stopping by at the Chartwells office located on the first floor of McMIndes Hall, or by writing an email to the manager's email address that can be found on the FHSU website. If no one tells Chartwell about it, they will have no idea about the environmental damage their single-use products are doing, and they will continue to use them; just letting them know is a huge step forward. It would be even more

effective if a number of students who shared the same concerns expressed them so that Chartwells can get a better understanding of the seriousness of the problem.

Billions of tons of plastic and styrofoam waste are creating severe environmental consequences on Earth, impacting humans and the entire ecosystem. The world is in a crisis of plastic and styrofoam and the McMIndes cafeteria is contributing to it. But simple solutions can save the world from a huge disaster. By replacing styrofoam and plastic single-use products with reusable products or other environmentally friendly products can reduce the amount of waste generated by tens of thousands of pounds each year. I hope Chartwells makes a smart decision forward to taking their responsibility for the sustainability of the environment and human civilization.

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