

Air carriers support 'Flying Cans'

An "only-in-Alaska" effort by the state's air carriers and Alaskans for Litter Prevention and Recycling (ALPAR) is creating a recycling revolution in Alaska's remote villages. In less than two years the program, called "Flying Cans," has resulted in the recycling of more than 21 tons of aluminum cans from Bush Alaska.

Under Flying Cans, a joint project of ALPAR and the Alaska Air Carriers Association, residents of remote communities can ship aluminum cans to the Anchorage Recycling Center and be paid Anchorage prices without leaving home. The cans are moved at no cost to the senders on a space-available basis.

The unique program is the brainchild of Robert Ensminger, a former vice president for postal affairs at MarkAir. Ensminger, who serves on the boards of both the air carriers organization and ALPAR, came up with the idea in 1987 as a way to introduce recycling to village Alaska.

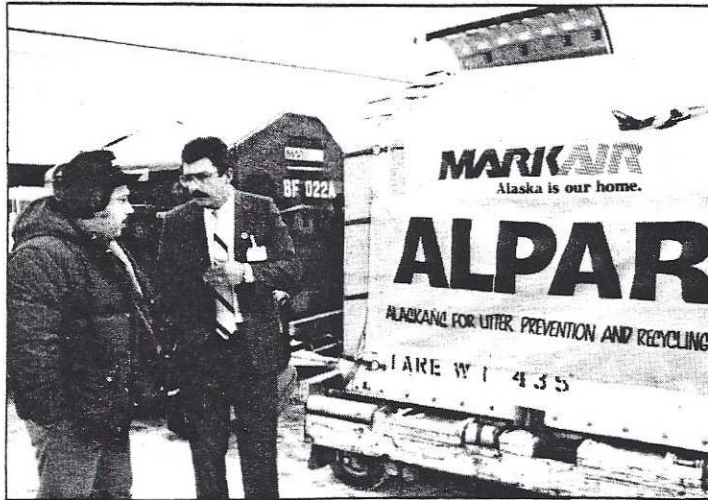
Ensminger approached the air carriers, got an affirmative response and then took the idea to ALPAR, which adopted the project, dubbed it 'Flying Cans' and made it a key part of its statewide recycling program.

To participate, residents of remote villages simply package up aluminum cans in heavy-duty trash sacks (or double up with thin-wall sacks), attach address labels and deliver the sacks to their local airport station managers. The sacks are routed to Anchorage and picked up at Anchorage International Airport by the Anchorage Recycling Center. The recycling center weighs the cans and mails a check to the sender at prevailing recycling prices.

The program was launched in January 1988 with a village publicity campaign utilizing a press conference, radio and television interviews with rural media, fliers and bulletin board information cards, and a mailing to schools and local government groups.

Representatives of ALPAR and the Anchorage Recycling Center visited several western Alaska villages to introduce the idea and assist villagers in getting recycling activities started. So far school groups and individual residents in 32 remote communities are participating and the program continues to grow. Flying Cans has already achieved what ALPAR considers remarkable success, but Ensminger says the potential for additional growth — through new individual and community participation — is still huge.

"There are hundreds of airports out there and they've all got aluminum cans," says Ensminger. "I'll call it successful when we get them all." He adds that even programs in communities already participating



Gene Peltola of Bethel (left), president of the Association of Village Council Presidents, and ALPAR Board Member Mark Williams check a shipment of aluminum cans from the Yukon Kuskokwim Delta arriving at Anchorage International Airport. (AN ANCHORAGE TIMES PHOTO)

have additional room to grow."

Despite the current volume, the air carriers are willing to haul even more cans. Their main concern, he said, is that the cans be adequately bagged to keep soda pop from spilling on the aircraft floors.

Flying Cans got a major financial boost last year when the Atlantic Richfield Foundation, charitable arm of ARCO, awarded ALPAR a \$15,000 grant to expand ALPAR's youth recycling program statewide. The youth program, called Can-Do Kids, provides children the materials to become young entrepreneurs making money through recycling. It has nearly 5,000 youngsters enrolled in the program, many of them in Anchorage and Fairbanks, and a small but growing number in the villages.

"The program works real well," says Chris Oberholtzer of Dillingham. "You just put the cans together, send them in and a check comes about a week later." Oberholtzer and his young daughter Crystal collect cans at home and from a local business establishment and have also convinced several friends to save them.

Recycling can be habit forming, as the teachers and students at Kotzebue Elementary School found out last year. "It took a while to get people to save the cans instead of throwing them away," said Larry Villers, principal. "but once we got the habit we got so we couldn't throw them away." Villers said the school made \$1,700 from can sales last year, money that was used for much-needed supplies. "And the money was a bonus because just keeping the community clean was a public service."

Ensminger says the keys to Flying Cans' success are that the senders

resolution, an important element in long-distance transactions. The recycling center's role takes a burden from the air carriers which would otherwise make the program difficult to sustain.

Oberholtz testifies to the problem resolution handling; he says Crystal's payment check was late only once. When he called the recycling center a staff member checked the books, found the shipment had indeed been received and the missed payment had been an oversight. Crystal received her check shortly afterward.

ALPAR President Keith Sopp of Anchorage says the success of the Flying Cans program has enabled recycling to spread statewide and develop new sources of valuable aluminum in Alaska's remotest villages. "We are delighted with Flying Cans and want to develop the program to its full potential. There are a lot more cans out there and if the air carriers will haul them, we plan to go after them."

Anyone interested in getting a recycling program started in Alaska may obtain information by calling Thomas E. Turner, general manager of the Anchorage Recycling Center, at 562-CANS or by writing ALPAR at PO Box 231231, Anchorage, Alaska 99523.

*A blast from the past:
1990 news article
demonstrates roots of
successful partnership
between AACA and
ALPAR*