Spotlight on Success: Wallenpaupack Watershed Warriors Turn Boat Shrink Wrap into an Environmental Success Story

Every spring, as boating season approaches, marinas around Lake Wallenpaupack prepare hundreds of boats for the water. But before those boats can return to the lake, the protective plastic shrink wrap used during the winter must be removed. Rather than allowing thousands of pounds of plastic to end up in landfills, a dedicated group of volunteers is finding a better solution.The Wallenpaupack Watershed Warriors, a collaborative initiative led by Rick Shema, Penn State Extension Master Watershed Steward for Wayne County, have turned boat shrink-wrap recycling into a growing community effort. Through partnerships with local organizations, municipalities, marinas, and a recycling company, the group collected approximately 1,540 individual boat covers during its first full year of operations in 2026. With each cover weighing an estimated 9 to 11 pounds, the initiative diverted more than 15,000 pounds of plastic from local landfills.

Lake Wallenpaupack is a popular recreational destination in northeastern Pennsylvania, attracting visitors from across the tri-state area and beyond. The man-made lake, constructed in 1926, covers approximately 5,700 acres and is home to more than 6,000 boats. With so many boats requiring winter protection, discarded shrink wrap presents a significant waste-management challenge.Previous attempts to establish a recycling program around the lake faced logistical difficulties. For example, recycling companies struggled to reach marinas and coordinate collections. Recognizing an opportunity, Shema volunteered to coordinate the initiative. Instead of relying on unanswered emails and phone calls, he personally visited marinas, introduced himself, and explained the benefits of participating.

What initially began as a pilot program intended to involve just one or two marinas quickly exceeded expectations. By the end of the first year, seven marina and boat-storage facilities had participated, with additional businesses expressing interest in joining. The volunteer effort contributed 108 hours of loading wraps, plus all the coordinating effort with the marinas and recycling company, putting the total effort well over 150 hours.

Shema credits persistence and making participation easy as two of the most important factors behind the program's success. When asked what advice he would give other communities hoping to establish similar recycling initiatives, his answer was simple: "Don't take no for an answer. Never give up." Fortunately, improvements to the recycling company's processing facility made the program much more accessible. The facility accepts wet shrink wrap, and participating marinas simply collect the used covers in designated piles, and volunteers coordinate scheduled pickups.

The shrink wrap, which is made of high-density polyethylene (HDPE), is transported to a recycling facility where it is processed into small plastic pellets. These pellets are then resold to manufacturers to create new products, including garbage cans and recycling bins.

The program creates benefits for everyone involved. Marinas avoid the expense of purchasing large dumpsters and paying landfill disposal fees, while the recycling company benefits from having collection logistics coordinated by volunteers. Most importantly, the community benefits from keeping thousands of pounds of plastic out of landfills and reducing the potential for plastic waste to break down into microplastics that can enter the surrounding watershed. The Watershed Warriors demonstrate the importance of collaboration in protecting local waterways. Other partners who support the effort include the Lackawack Sanctuary, Wayne County Conservation District, Penn State Extension Master Watershed Stewards, independent community volunteers, participating businesses, and a local recycling partner.

The Wallenpaupack Watershed Warriors consist of around 11 active volunteers contributing their time and energy to organize pickups, transport materials, and coordinate participating facilities. During peak collection periods, volunteers can collect between 300 and 400 boat covers in a single pickup. Although the work can be wet, muddy, and physically demanding, the group continues to show up because of its shared commitment to environmental stewardship.

For Shema, the greatest motivation is not recognition or reward, but knowing that the work is making a difference. "Helping the environment and giving back. That's the motivation," he explained. The group often concludes collection days by gathering for lunch at a local restaurant, providing an opportunity to socialize, build friendships, and celebrate their accomplishments. These connections have helped create a strong sense of community among people who share a common goal: protecting the lake and its watershed.

Although the first year was a tremendous success, the Watershed Warriors are already planning their next steps. In the upcoming season, the group hopes to expand participation to at least 10 marina and storage facilities while bringing additional support from Pike County and two local municipalities.Another major goal is reaching private boat owners who shrink-wrap and store their boats at home rather than at marinas. By establishing municipal drop-off locations, the group hopes to give these residents an easy way to recycle their used boat covers instead of throwing them away. Through continued outreach, social media promotion, and community partnerships, the Watershed Warriors hope to make shrink-wrap recycling a regular part of preparing for the boating season around Lake Wallenpaupack.

Their success demonstrates that meaningful environmental change does not always require a large organization or extensive funding. Sometimes, it starts with one person willing to knock on a few doors, bring people together, and refuse to give up. As the Watershed Warriors

continue to grow, their work serves as an example of how local partnerships and dedicated volunteers can make a lasting difference for Pennsylvania's watersheds and rivers.



