

# Sustainable packaging - business brief

How to engage with extended producer  
responsibility

2026



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Interview with Amcor's David Clark

# How EPR can incentivise better packaging

Extended producer responsibility can drive packaging design, fund recycling programmes and improve collection rates. Speaking with Ian Welsh, Amcor's David Clark explains how

So, what are the key steps to establishing an effective extended producer responsibility (EPR) system for packaging? Amcor's David Clark says that the first is to review in the jurisdiction the amount of material that is available. He says that it's important to think about what's reasonable to expect to be collected initially, and then "how do we improve that over time?" In other words, consider what the existing facilities are and what is being recycled at the start of the process compared with what potentially the future might look like.

Clark says: "What I like to see is an end-state vision of what we want five years or 10 years out, and then let's work backwards, as opposed to starting with only what we have today and then how do we try to tweak that to get where we're going."

Once that has been put in place, the elements required going forward are plans around what materials are going to go into the market. "Which of those can reasonably be collected and recycled? What do we do with the ones that can't?", are key questions, Clark says.

Indicative of the potential positive impact that EPR can give, Clark points out that typically fees will be higher for materials that can't be recycled or disrupt recycling systems – or even in some cases bans on some materials. In such circumstances, the onus is on packaging manufacturers to develop alternative materials that are viable within the recycling stream. "All this needs to be taken into account when we're looking at how we implement and improve EPR."



The onus is on packaging manufacturers to develop alternative materials that are viable within the recycling stream.



## Focus on value

Brand-manufacturer relationships can be profoundly impacted by EPR. Clark says that it all stems from the value proposition for companies. "The reason brands and retailers buy packaging is to protect products from manufacture, through retail so that they're safe and fresh when consumers want to use them." What EPR changes is adding an additional cost to materials and product design "that changes the economics of decisions around packaging".

As Clark points out, packaging will still have to perform and meet regulatory requirements, but there may be "different incentives when you look at the total cost of EPR fees plus the packaging and the other things that go into the equation". Where responsibility for EPR fees sits within a company is also an important factor.

"If businesses are treating EPR fees as a cost of compliance, and the people making packaging decisions aren't aware of the EPR fees, they're not going to make the same decisions as they would if that EPR fee was part of their cost decision," Clark argues.

Sometimes, of course, things just land in the wrong budget. He stresses the importance of getting those decisions made as close as possible to the packaging decisions on the P&L of the individual products or brands. Where those decisions are made can have some real impact, both in terms of cost savings in the long run and in terms of improving packaging.

## Three-factor success

But, what does good EPR look like? Clark says there are three factors.

"A well-designed EPR system sets fees or has provisions for eco-modulation that provide incentives for companies to produce and use better packaging." Typically, he says, this means packaging that is easier to collect, easier to recycle, worth more to recyclers, and doesn't contaminate systems. "If we can provide the right incentives through an EPR programme, through lower fees, to move people toward better packaging, that's a bonus."

The second is that EPR can provide funding for recycling. Clark points out: "Communities perpetually struggle to fund good recycling programmes. It almost always costs more to collect, sort, and recycle the materials than the resulting recycled material is worth in the market when compared to virgin materials." This is an inherent economic disadvantage that EPR can help close.

Thirdly, “if you combine good design, which can help improve the economics with the funding mechanisms, this can really accelerate and make the recycling system sustainable in the long run”.

### Any EPR better than none!

Fragmentation of EPR approach across neighbouring jurisdictions presents obvious challenges. Clark's view is that while this is not ideal, “even non-universal EPR is going to be preferable to no EPR”.

In the US, for example, there have been 11 different bottle deposit systems operating over a long period of time, and those states still have much higher collection rates and more efficient systems than the states that don't, Clark points out.

European EPR has worked “reasonably well with individual countries, but hopefully, it's going to work much better with a more harmonised system” as new EU-side regulation evolves. “Getting systems in place that we can learn from can be a starting point toward harmonisation.” And this is better than waiting until the perfect system emerges.

Other global examples of EPR are emerging. Clark highlights that “a few Asian countries are implementing very different flavours of EPR”. The situation is similar in Latin America. “Even some countries in Africa are looking at how can they implement EPR in ways that are appropriate for their countries and their economic system.”

Clark says he is encouraged by the willingness to move in some cases and not wait until there is perfect harmonisation “under a UN treaty or some other framework”.

### Unintended consequences

However, the law of unintended consequences is fully in play, particularly for non-harmonized EPR systems when fee-setting processes may be different in one region compared the region right next door.

Clark points out: “You [can] end up with a system where the EPR fees for one packaging format, for example glass bottles, may have a very low fee in one state, or province, or country, and then aluminium cans may have a very low fee in another country where glass bottles have a high fee.”

In such a situation, it is “unclear what direction the brands or decision makers should go in terms of the packaging that they choose”. Brands must decide if they are going to run two different packages, which is probably not practical in many cases.

### A reuse future?

Another big packaging topic is of course how to make reuse models effective and practical. Is there a role for EPR here? Clark thinks there is.

“In some EPR programmes, there is a requirement that industry provides a certain amount of reusable packaging. That can be implemented in different ways, but maybe 5% of products should be in reusable packaging. The expectation is that the entire EPR system will fund the development and implementation of that.”

The jury is out, Clark believes, as to how reuse models can be made better in terms of the consumer experience, and actually lower waste.

“You really need to get high return rates to make reuse systems work, but it's going to be an opportunity to learn.”

A second point is how EPR fees are allocated in a reuse model. “If I make a package and then I'm able to use it 20 times before it has to be disposed of, then my EPR fees on that can be allocated over 20 uses and not one.” The question then of course is, “can I facilitate an entire return, refill, cleaning programme at a cost that's less than the EPR fee?”

Clark says that, at the moment, in most cases the answer is going to be no, “but it's an area that's really interesting to explore as these programs get implemented”.

### Evolution not revolution

So how will EPR evolve and what challenges should the sector be ready for? Clark believes that EPR will continue to roll out. However, fragmentation may remain a problem. “My own projection is over at least the next several years, there will probably not be much harmonisation in terms of systems. Even where we see harmonisation in regulation, there may be some differences in implementation. What that means for businesses is a real increase in complexity in the short-term.”



“Even when you sort all your packaging to meet the categories of one state, it may be different for the next state that you must report into.”

The necessary transparency will bring complications for companies too. “Each jurisdiction that is implementing EPR has reporting requirements. They may have different categories of covered materials, for example. Even when you sort all your packaging to meet the categories of one state, it may be different for the next state that you must report into.”

There are other administrative issues that need to be resolved, Clark says. “There are still some complexities around materials being imported or exported from states, and when those fees get paid, that need to be worked out.” But he argues that these are the sort of issues that “we just have to learn by doing going forward”. ■

*David Clark is chief sustainability officer at Amcor. For the full interview with Innovation Forum's Ian Welsh [click here](#).*

Sector snapshot

# Extended producer responsibility – the global picture

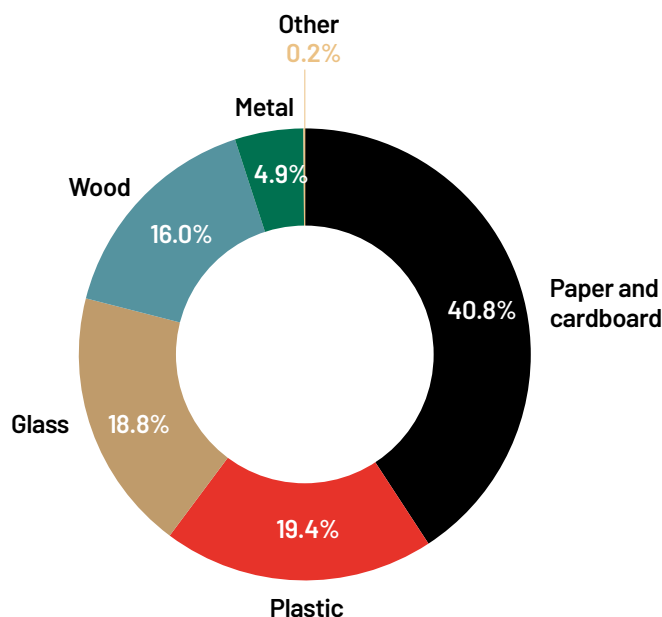
By **Catie Ball**

The growth of extended producer responsibility programmes across the world has led to a patchwork of similar but different schemes

During the 2025 negotiations for a Global Plastics Treaty in Switzerland, governments elevated extended producer responsibility as a key tool to curb plastic pollution and fund waste management infrastructure. With the EU advancing a harmonised EPR framework under the new Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR), and several US states adopting their own packaging EPR laws, brands face a complex landscape of compliance obligations and opportunities for circular innovation.

NGO **WRAP** defines EPR as a regulatory mechanism that places responsibility for post-consumer product and packaging management on manufacturers or sellers. In short, producers are responsible for what happens to their products after their consumers are done using them. While EPR is often discussed in the context of packaging, the concept of EPR has existed for many products since the 1990s. EPR gained broader visibility only in the last decade as global packaging regulations accelerated.

Packaging waste generated, by packaging material, EU, 2022 (%)



Note: Eurostat estimates.

Source: Eurostat (online data code: env\_waspac)



## Recycling and EPR

An estimated **40% of all plastic produced** annually is put towards packaging applications, the majority designed for single use. Despite decades of recycling programmes, only about 9% of global **plastics** were recycled in 2018. While there is limited research that determines more recent global recycling rates, a **2022 study** reported that 9.5% of the plastic produced worldwide derived from recycled materials, indicating that the majority of plastic production remained dependent on virgin plastic.

The overall packaging recycling in the US hovered around 53% as of 2018 according to the **EPA**, but the US Plastics Pact estimates that less than 14% of plastic packaging is recycled. Contrarily, **Europe's** rates were estimated at 41% of all generated plastic packaging waste in 2022. Still, even with the higher recycling rate, packaging waste generated outpaces the rate of recycling.

Despite these bleak rates, consumer awareness is increasing the pressure on governments and producers. Viral images of plastic pollution have brought awareness to the pollution crisis, turning packaging pollution action into a symbol of corporate responsibility.

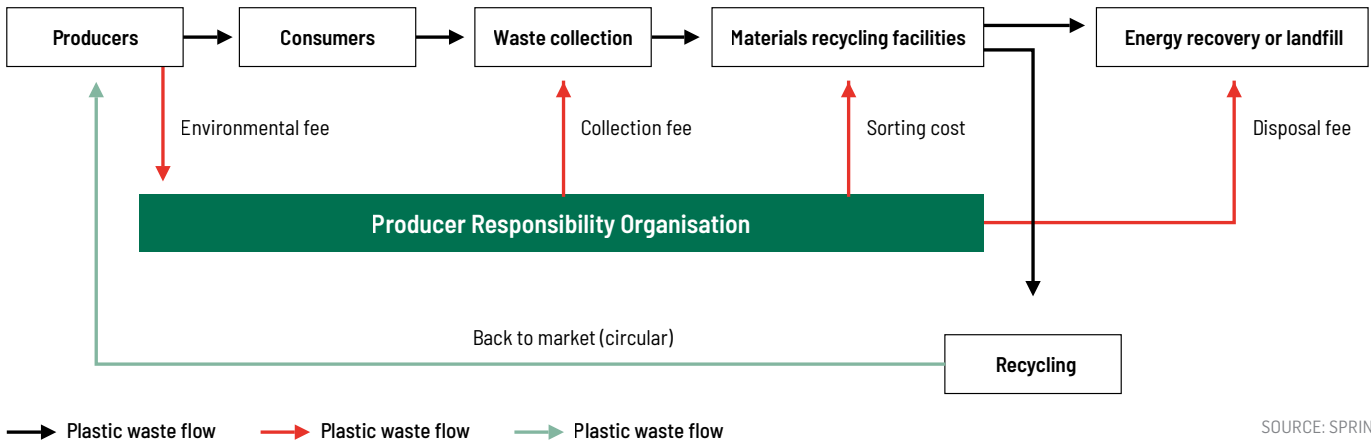
While recycling infrastructure and recyclable materials are a critical component of pollution reduction, they are only a small piece of the more complex EPR frameworks.

Traditionally, governments have managed waste collection, sorting, and processing, funded by the taxpayer; producers played a minimal role. Municipal programmes have diverted some materials from landfills, but struggle to keep pace with growing volumes and varied packaging types.

EPR shifts responsibility from consumer behaviour to producer action. Companies now finance the collection, sorting and recycling of their packaging and are incentivised to redesign materials for recyclability. This connects environmental responsibility with financial incentives: the more circular the packaging, the lower the fees. By tying waste management costs directly to producers, EPR creates an economic mechanism that encourages reduced packaging complexity, higher-quality materials, and maximising recycling efficiency.

Where recycling addresses post-use material collection, EPR integrates environmental stewardship into product design and corporate strategy.

Flow chart of the role of a producer responsibility organisation in the plastics value chain with take-back requirements and advanced disposal fees



SOURCE: SPRINGNATURE

**The US versus global approach**

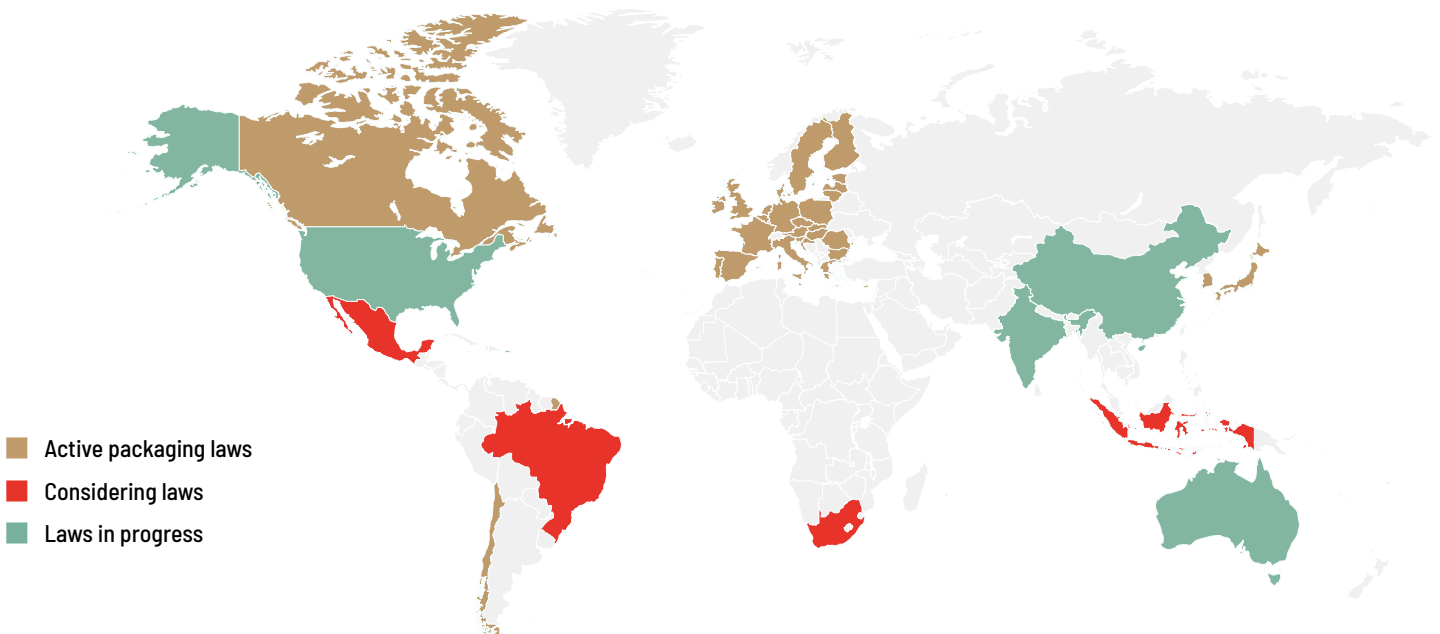
The EU leads in packaging EPR through **PPWR**, which sets harmonised targets, reporting obligations, and fees, though national implementation varies. Differences in labelling, reporting and fee structures across the member states create state-level compliance complexity for global brands.

Outside of Europe, other countries have adopted EPR frameworks with varying degrees of scope and enforcement.

- Canada**
  - EPR implemented through federal guidance and legislation
  - Ensures regional adaptation while maintaining national principles
- South Korea**
  - EPR Act mandates producer-funded recycling and reporting (packaging, electronics, etc)
- Japan**
  - Container and Packaging Recycling Law creates a shared responsibility model via obligations for municipalities and producers

**Countries with EPR Laws**

While some regions are moving toward standardised EPR rules to facilitate international trade and compliance, others maintain a unique national framework, creating challenges for multinational brands.



By contrast, the US lacks a comprehensive federal EPR law for packaging. State-level programmes in seven states form a patchwork landscape, requiring brands to adapt operations and reporting for each jurisdiction. As a result, Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs) play a critical role in providing a streamlined and cost-effective compliance solution, allowing producers to pool resources.

Some states have enacted packaging EPR laws, each with its own requirements regarding producer fees, reporting obligations, and recycling targets: California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington.

In the absence of federal guidance, stakeholders must navigate these differing rules in each market.

This fragmented landscape is intricate and difficult to navigate. Compliance requires careful monitoring of multiple regulatory obligations. The contrast between the EU’s pathway to harmonisation and a legally enforceable framework, and the US’s decentralised and state-driven approach, underscores the biggest challenge for brands: accountability for both the products they are selling and environmental footprint of every package they put into the market.

### Fragmentation within the EU

Although the EU is considered the global leader in packaging EPR, implementation remains highly fragmented. PPWR sets common requirements for member states, but national governments retain significant flexibility in implementation, resulting in a **patchwork** of divergent rules, creating costly compliance challenges for brands operating across multiple markets.

Labelling is one of the clearest examples of fragmentation because the requirements are open for different interpretations. For example:

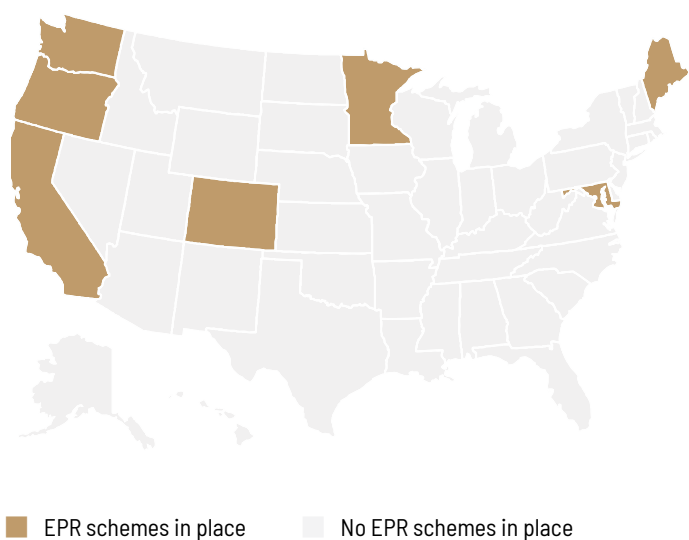
- **Italy:** Companies must provide highly detailed, consumer-facing instructions on packaging labels.
- **Germany:** Labelling focuses more narrowly on material categories.
- **France:** Requires mandatory sorting logos and placing restrictions on claims such as “biodegradable” or “compostable”.

These differences necessitate multiple packaging versions for producers in what is ostensibly a single market.

### Global v US approach

Category	Global (eg EU, UK, Canada, Japan, Chile)	United States
<b>Regulatory framework</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Centralised, top-down approach led by regional authorities (eg PPWR).</li> <li>• In the EU: harmonised across member states.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decentralised, state-by-state legislation.</li> <li>• California, Colorado, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington.</li> </ul>
<b>Scope of materials</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad coverage: packaging of all materials.</li> <li>• Some frameworks include single-use and non-packaging plastics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on packaging materials.</li> <li>• Some include paper and printed materials; others exclude industrial packaging.</li> </ul>
<b>Producer obligations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandatory registration and fee payments.</li> <li>• Fund collection, sorting and recycling.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Differ by state.</li> <li>• Fund collection and processing fees, targets, and enforcement vary.</li> </ul>
<b>Governance model</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PROs manage operations under government oversight.</li> <li>• Standardised reporting and performance metrics.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State environmental agencies oversee compliance.</li> <li>• Producers can form or join PROs voluntarily.</li> </ul>
<b>Implementation timeline</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• EU: Full implementation of new PPWR expected 2025–2030.</li> <li>• Canada: Active systems in most provinces.</li> <li>• Japan and Korea: Mature systems in place.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early stages; first operational systems expected 2026–2028.</li> </ul>
<b>Circularity targets</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Legally binding recycling and reuse targets (eg, EU: 65% recycling rate for packaging by 2025; 70% by 2030).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vary by state; many align loosely with national recycling goals (50–60%) but lack unified national standards.</li> </ul>
<b>Innovation focus</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong incentives for eco-design, recyclability, and use of post-consumer recycled content.</li> <li>• Innovation tied to regulatory compliance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Driven by brand commitments and cost efficiency.</li> <li>• Patchwork policy limits uniform innovation signals.</li> </ul>

### US states that have EPR schemes in place



### Germany v France v Spain

Reporting obligations also vary. For example, companies selling into France, Spain and Germany all face [producer responsibility reporting](#) obligations, but specific data points may diverge: tonnage categories, reporting intervals, and definitions of material types all differ from one region to another. This lack of cohesion makes it difficult to standardise compliance systems, forcing many to invest in dedicated teams or software to reconcile international demands.

[Fee structures further compound the complexity.](#) In theory, eco-modulation is designed to reward easily recyclable packaging, while penalising problematic materials; the actual financial implications may drastically differ. A plastic food tray may be subject to a modest fee in Germany, but face a higher levy in France or Spain. These discrepancies can add millions of euros in unexpected costs every year. (See graphic below.)

On the compliance side, companies face heavy operational burdens, ranging from higher administrative overhead to duplicated packaging design. Supply chains become more complex as materials and labelling must be customised to the market, and

differentiating fee structures distort competition, leaving brands struggling to forecast and manage costs across borders. Even within the EU, where overarching standards exist, there are enough regulatory differences to make meeting compliance requirements difficult for suppliers.

The complexity increases exponentially on a global scale. Suppliers must navigate an even more diverse regulatory landscape, facing a patchwork of rules, reporting standards and fee systems.

### Industry responses

Trade groups and multinational corporations have repeatedly called for [greater EU-level harmonisation](#), arguing that divergent national frameworks undermine the EU’s single-market principles. Lobbying efforts around PPWR have therefore focused not only on tightening recycling targets, but also on creating more consistent requirements. Whether PPWR will succeed in reducing fragmentation remains a challenge to be tackled, and for now, compliance in the EU continues to demand individual navigation.

### Regulatory change

The next decade will be marked by regulatory acceleration, as both the EU and US move from policy to proposals, implementation to monitoring and enforcement.

In the US, companies must prepare for the phased roll-out of new [state-level EPR laws](#), all on different time scales over the next few years.

In [Europe](#), revisions to existing regulations are imminent, including new rules on recyclability targets, labelling, and material restrictions expected to take effect within the next few years.

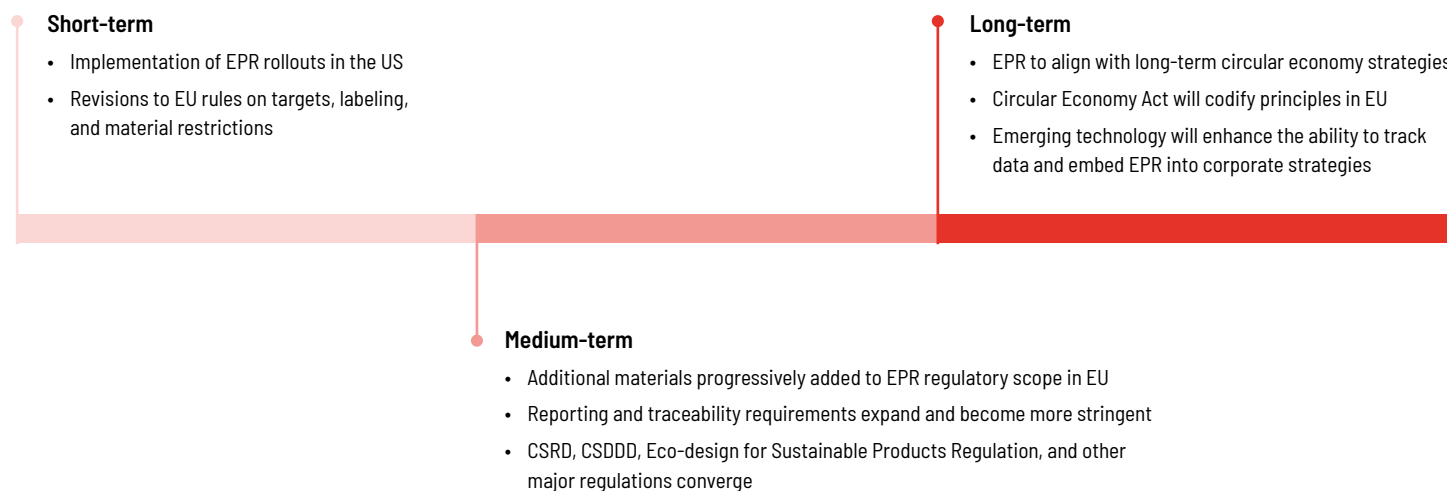
EPR will expand in scope, bringing more materials under producer responsibility and tightening performance and reporting obligations. Reporting and traceability requirements will become more advanced with regulators demanding more precise and traceable data on material flows.

Simultaneously, packaging rules will converge with [broader sustainability mandates](#), such as the EU’s Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD), the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), the [Eco-design for Sustainable Products Regulation](#), and the forthcoming [EU Digital Product Passport](#). Packaging data will no longer be siloed; it will form part of a company’s integrated ESG profile.

### Summary of EPR fee differences Germany v France v Spain

Feature	Germany	France	Spain
System	Competitively tendered dual system	Eco-modulated system via PRO (CITEO)	PRO system with additional plastic tax
Example fee driver	Material type and weight	Detailed environmental criteria (eg, recyclability, recycled content)	Material type, weight, and virgin plastic content
Example fee impact	Relatively stable fee, calculated per tonne of material	Fees can increase or decrease based on environmental factors, encouraging design changes	Significantly higher fees for virgin plastic due to additional taxes

EPR timelines



Looking further, EPR will integrate with long-term circular economy strategies. The European Commission has already linked packaging reform to the Clean Industrial Deal and the EU Competitiveness Compass, signalling that resource efficiency will be central to industrial policy.

The anticipated Circular Economy Act is poised to codify circular principles across sectors, and the EU seeks to double the circularity rate. Emerging technologies such as digital product passports and blockchain-based traceability are expected to underpin these systems.

**Infrastructure funding**

The central, and divisive, question of every EPR system is a fundamental one: who pays? Municipalities have historically funded recycling, but it is consistently a challenge for consumers to find good recycling programmes. This is because it almost always costs more to collect, sort and recycle than the resulting recycled material is worth compared to using virgin materials. This is perhaps an inherent economic disadvantage that EPR can help close.



The central, and divisive, question of every EPR scheme is: who pays?

In many European countries, **eco-modulation** rewards circular design choices. In the US, states like Maine and Oregon have established third-party stewardship organisations that manage producer payments and disburse funds to municipalities.

In **France**, eco-modulation has driven a measurable shift away from non-recyclable materials, while in **Germany**, the “dual system” channels billions of euros annually into collection and recycling. In Oregon, stewardship organisations not only fund infrastructure, but also work with community actors. Portland’s “**People’s Depot**”, operated by the Ground Score Association, shows how EPR funding can create social and environmental benefits by providing income opportunities for informal waste pickers.

**DRS** often complements packaging EPR. Germany and **Lithuania** report collection rates >90% compared to far lower rates under kerbside-only systems. In the US, “**bottle bills**” have been in place in some states for decades, but new momentum is emerging as states link DRS to their broader EPR strategies.

**Brand-manufacturer relationships**

Shared responsibility is a hallmark component of EPR, but in practice it creates new pain points. Brands often rely on packaging suppliers for accurate data on material composition, recyclability and sourcing. Manufacturers in turn must adapt to reporting and design requirements that vary by market. This interdependence elevates the importance of data sharing, supply chain transparency and coordinated compliance.

**Collaboration**

Eco-modulated fees require detailed material reporting, pushing manufacturers to build reliable data systems. Weak data pipelines increase the risk of errors, penalties, and reputational harm. Using certified third-party platforms can streamline reporting and reduce duplication for both parties.

### Brand strategies

Clear contractual arrangements that specify responsibility for compliance tasks help avoid disputes. Some brands are proactively exploring strategies including:

- Lightweighting - material use and transport cost reduction
- Material Swaps - shifting to mono-material solutions
- Closed-loop pilots - reprocessing collected packaging into new materials
- De-risking new recycling technologies - securing access to food-grade post-consumer recycled (PCR) content

### Challenges and opportunities

EPR challenges are substantial: fragmented rules, rising fees, heavier admin burdens, and reputational risks must be considered. Some EPR systems have provisions that certain packaging is at risk of being banned in the marketplace if it cannot meet requirements. In a heavily scrutinised environment, falling short on obligations can quickly translate into public backlash.

Yet, the opportunities are equally substantial. Circular innovation is creating entirely new business models (refill, reuse, closed-loop systems, etc) that reduce waste and create differentiation. By embedding circularity into design and operations, brands not only reduce waste but also differentiate themselves in a crowded market as pioneers of sustainability.

Material efficiency offers further value: lightweighting, simplifying materials, or shifting to lower-impact substrates can cut compliance costs while simultaneously shrinking carbon footprints.

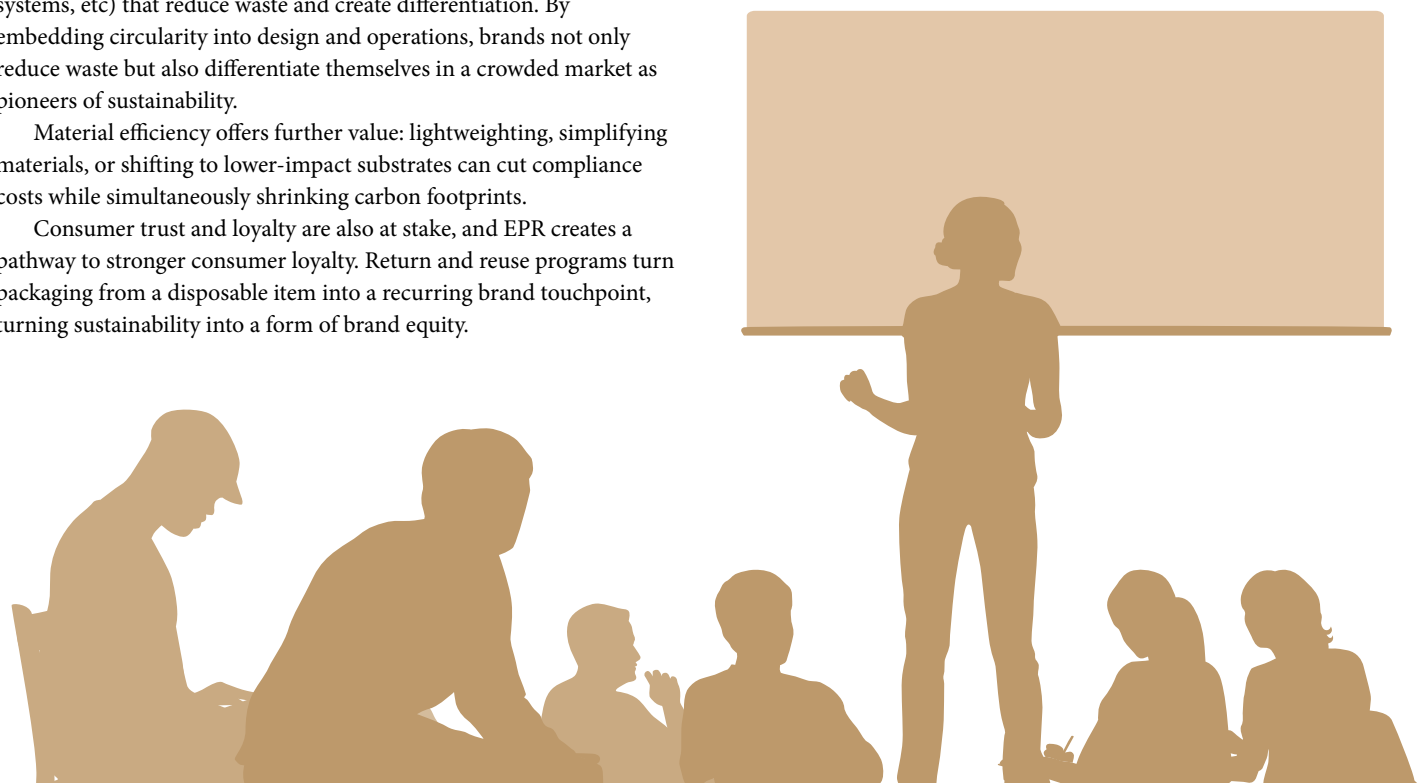
Consumer trust and loyalty are also at stake, and EPR creates a pathway to stronger consumer loyalty. Return and reuse programs turn packaging from a disposable item into a recurring brand touchpoint, turning sustainability into a form of brand equity.

### What's next?

The rise of EPR presents more than a shifting compliance landscape. It is a modernisation of packaging and resource management. Stakeholders must focus on three priorities: harmonisation, innovation and collaboration.

- Brands should redesign packaging with circularity, recyclability, material efficiency and traceability.
- Manufacturers should strengthen supply chain resilience by investing in recycled content and preparing for new design standards.
- Policymakers should balance ambition with pragmatism and infrastructure needs.

In the short term, stakeholders must prepare for expanded reporting, eco-modulation fees, and expanded DRS adoption. In the medium term, digital tools and advanced recycling technologies will become essential differentiators. And in the long term, EPR's success depends on coordinated stakeholders' action to create a system that is financially sustainable, environmentally effective, and designed to work harmoniously across borders. ■



Stakeholders must focus on three priorities: harmonisation, innovation and collaboration

# The simple questions reshaping packaging design

By Diana Kim

As EPR schemes reshape the economics of packaging, business leaders are embracing collaborative innovation and circular design principles to transform what consumers consider “convenient”

There is perhaps an uncomfortable truth facing the packaging sector and its ambitions for a more sustainable future: the solutions exist, the technology works, but cost remains the defining barrier between ambition and reality. Increasingly it’s becoming clear that innovation in sustainable packaging is no longer optional, it’s economically imperative.

“Sustainability never ends, so innovation never stops,” declared an attendee at the 2025 Sustainable Packaging Innovation Forum in Amsterdam, capturing the relentless momentum driving the sector. The event, and the US equivalent in Chicago, brought together brands, manufacturers, and policymakers, tackled everything from flexible packaging challenges to the economics of reusable systems, while wrestling with a persistent question: can the industry transform consumer behaviour as rapidly as it’s transforming materials?

## Breaking the single-use mindset

Throughout the conferences, case studies suggested consumers may be ready for change when presented with genuinely better alternatives. “It’s not better for the planet. It’s better all around,” one delegate noted, describing those revelatory moments when reuse systems prove superior on every metric, not just environmental ones.



Can the industry transform consumer behaviour as rapidly as it’s transforming materials?



The beverage sector is emerging as a leader. With major players including Heineken, Asahi, Coca-Cola, Diageo and PepsiCo all advancing closed-loop systems, the industry is demonstrating that circular packaging is achievable at scale. The crucial insight? When businesses get the customer story right, the business case follows naturally. However, these successes largely operate in business-to-business contexts, where logistics prove more manageable than consumer-facing retail environments.

## The EPR catalyst

Extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes are emerging in many jurisdictions. PackUK, which launched in January 2025, aims to shift the cost of managing household packaging waste from taxpayers to businesses using the “polluter pays” principle. While corporate communications teams may instinctively resist such regulations, there is a counterintuitive perspective – for leading companies already investing in sustainability, EPR levels the playing field by incentivising competitors to follow suit.

The UK government’s commitment to establishing a Producer Responsibility Organisation in 2026, for example, does appear to signal serious intent. The scheme is expected to support 25,000 jobs and stimulate over £10bn in investment. For brands operating in the UK, this represents both challenge and opportunity – the chance to influence how the organisation operates by engaging actively with industry bodies.

## The flexible conundrum

If reuse systems showed promise, flexible packaging is proving the sector’s most vexing challenge. With no silver bullet solution, a potential three-pronged approach emerged at the forum in Amsterdam:

optimising materials in the short term, supporting robust recycling infrastructure, and investing in reuse systems for the long term. One speaker offered memorable practical guidance: when designing packaging, simply ask “which bin will this go in?”

The discussions in Amsterdam and Chicago acknowledged uncomfortable realities. Incineration remains necessary in the short term, though many sector experts urge vigilance against building new capacity. Meanwhile, innovations in sorting technology, potentially enhanced by artificial intelligence, offer hope for handling complex waste streams more effectively.

### Collaboration over competition

Perhaps the Amsterdam forum’s most striking revelation came from Belgian retailer initiatives demonstrating how competitors could share intellectual property and navigate competition law to achieve collective sustainability goals. While the example cited – which was collaborative work around mushroom packaging – might seem modest, it illustrated the persistence required to solve seemingly intractable problems one by one.

Standardisation has emerged as a critical enabler for reuse systems. Shoppers won’t arrive at stores “with all their reusable bags and 40 empty containers”, as an attendee in Amsterdam observed. The industry must design systems around practical consumer behaviour, not idealised versions of it. This realisation sparked discussion about “EPR 2.0”, using EPR infrastructure and funding to support collection points and make reuse more convenient than single-use shopping.

### Cost reality

Yet cost remains the elephant in the room. Packaging may be cheap, but logistics are expensive. A saving of fractions of a penny on materials may add significant distribution complexity. Innovative solutions around cleaning shortcuts and reverse logistics offer some hope, though the mathematics remain challenging even at scale.

Consumer demand could partially offset these costs in certain categories. Discussions emphasised the importance of two-way communication between brands and consumers to ensure packaging solutions resonate, particularly in premium segments where sustainability aligns with brand values.



A saving of fractions of a penny on materials may add significant distribution complexity.

### Looking forward

A practical approach could be to think in terms of horizons: what can be achieved immediately, what requires mid-term planning, and what long-term investments must begin today precisely because transformation takes time. The European Commission’s active engagement in the Amsterdam conference suggested regulatory support from the EU for “innovative regulation”, a partnership approach between government and industry to enable rather than merely police sustainability transitions. The picture in the US is more fragmented, but examples are emerging of some state and municipal level innovation.

The consensus? Pilot programmes must focus on testing logistics and acceptability, not market research. Volumetric modelling and customer insights matter more than consumer surveys in single locations. And, critically, the industry must resist incremental thinking when transformational change is required.

For an industry long dominated by one-way efficiency, the challenge of reverse logistics and circular systems demands nothing less than wholesale reinvention. Appetite for change exists, collaboration is possible, and solutions are emerging. Whether momentum can overcome cost barriers remains the defining question. ■

*The challenges and opportunities surrounding sustainable packaging and circular economy solutions will be central themes at the 2026 [Sustainable Packaging Innovation Forum](#) (Amsterdam, 10-11 March). [Click here](#) for information on how to get involved.*

## Further resources

### Global plastics treaty

**Summary article**

[Tracking the global plastics treaty](#)

**Podcast**

[Q&A with Jodie Roussell, Nestlé](#)

**INC negotiations debrief webinars**

- [INC-4 debrief](#) with WWF, The Recycling Partnership, Mondelēz International and Nestlé
- [INC-5 debrief](#) with Nestlé and Planet Tracker
- [INC-5.2 debrief](#) with PepsiCo, World Economic Forum, Tomra and IAWP

### Material choices

**Webinar**

[Feedstocks of the future](#) with Notpla, Mondi Group and traceless

**Podcast**

[Material innovations to look out for](#) with Plastic Pollution Coalition

**Podcast**

[Zero-waste flexible packaging](#) with SmartSolve

### Reuse and circular systems

**Webinar**

[Reuse by design](#) with The Heineken Company, Visa, Tomra and Ellen MacArthur Foundation

**Podcast**

[Waste management and circular economy](#) with TerraCycle

**Podcast**

[Scaling circular packaging beyond the buzz](#) with Diageo

### Further resources on EPR

**Webinar**

[Strategies for local compliance and global consistency](#) with Amcor, WRAP and EPR expert

**Podcast**

[What effective EPR could look like](#) with Amcor

## Join the conversation



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