



Sustainable Packaging Innovation Forum 2026

North America

27-28 October | Chicago

*From risk to ROI: How to leverage packaging
innovation for new value creation*

Gold sponsor

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For more information or to get involved, please contact Lia Da Giau at lia.dagiau@innovationforum.co.uk

Pre-conference visit – 26th October

12:00pm–4:00pm Visit to TerraCycle’s sorting facility and operations center

Join us for an exclusive on-site visit to TerraCycle’s new North American Operations Center in Aurora. We’ll tour the site, seeing how they sort through the waste they receive through their free recycling programs, Zero Waste Boxes, and Commercial recycling business.

Attendees will be divided into smaller groups, each cycling through three distinct stages of the visit. The experience begins with an introductory video on TerraCycle’s recycling processes, offering a behind-the-scenes look at how materials are handled from collection to recovery. Groups will then move on to a guided tour of the facility itself, exploring firsthand how end-of-life products are sorted and processed across various waste streams. To round off the visit, attendees will have the opportunity to connect over refreshments, a chance to share reflections and build connections ahead of the event.

Please note that only registered conference attendees can take part in this visit. Please register your interest via the form in the booking confirmation, or contact Lia Da Giau.

Day 1 – 27th October

9:00am–9:30am **Sustainable packaging innovation: What it means today for industry and consumers**

Regulations like EPR have moved packaging choices onto the boardroom agenda. The brands leading the way are those that see sustainability innovation not as a legal obligation but as a commercial lever: driving material innovation, strengthening consumer loyalty and getting ahead of costs before they become unavoidable. This session sets the scene: what the innovation opportunity looks like today, why the business case is stronger than ever, and what's holding companies back from moving faster. We'll look at:

- **The compliance trap:** Meeting regulatory requirements is necessary, but it's not enough to build a future-proof packaging portfolio. Why should companies invest in packaging innovation, and how to direct resources to meet more than one business need?
- **Pressures and opportunities:** Consumer expectations, regulatory tightening and supply chain risk are real, but so are the opportunities for new markets. Which companies are getting ahead of the curve, how?
- **Why innovation matters:** Even when the right innovation exists – one that works for business and people – the challenge how to scale it to market. What does it actually take to make R&D potential a commercial reality?

9:30am–10:15am **EPR compliance infrastructure: What do the rules require and what can the market deliver?**

Seven bills for Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) on packaging have now passed in the U.S, and the framework is no longer hypothetical. Producers are being asked to navigate a patchwork of requirements that vary state by state, and join collective producer responsibility organisations to fund the end-of-life management of their packaging. This session cuts through the complexity, looking at what role actors across the value chain play to make EPR systems work, and where the gap between regulatory ambition and market reality is more evident.

- **How to stay on top of requirements:** Fee structures, eco-modulation, covered product definitions make EPR compliance very technical. With inconsistencies in how this is implemented across jurisdictions, how are businesses getting on top of requirements without drowning in complexity?
- **Infrastructure for compliance:** EPR programs assume recycling collection, sortation and end markets are there to absorb what producers put into the system. In many cases, they aren't yet. How do businesses plan around an infrastructure gap that isn't only theirs to solve, but is theirs to navigate?
- **From cost center to strategic lever:** EPR compliance carries real financial exposure, particularly for difficult-to-recycle materials and formats. How are businesses getting ahead of fee increases through smarter packaging design?

10:15am-10:45am **'Design for recycling': Why we need more dialogue between upstream and downstream**

'Design for recyclability' is on everybody's mind. Ecomodulation criteria and EPR fees are pushing brands to move towards packaging materials and formats with more established recycling pathways. Collection, sorting and recycling infrastructure are different across geographies, which makes it hard for companies to implement universal design guidelines consistently across markets. While there is still disconnect between those designing packaging and those processing it at end-of-life, this is beginning to change: early examples show brands working directly with recyclers to identify pain points, so which components contaminate or block processing, and feeding those insights back into design decisions.

The challenge now is scaling that dialogue. What the industry may need is not just better design guidelines, but a structured engagement framework – similar to the protocols brands already use with suppliers – applied downstream to waste management operators. Treating the waste sector as part of the value chain, not just the end of the supply chain, could drive more effective collaboration on both material innovation and infrastructure development. In this panel, we'll discuss:

- **Brand-recycler collaboration:** Where has it worked, what made it effective, and what can be learned to apply this more broadly?
- **Compliance-readiness:** How can brands and waste operators collaborate more effectively to substantiate recyclability claims, and meet EPR and traceability requirements?

10:45am-11:15am *Networking break*

11:15am-12:00pm **How to leverage packaging as an asset: Materials, operations and what actually drives ROI**

Brands and retailers have doubled down on switches to paper, aluminium and glass packaging, but material substitution is just one piece of the puzzle. Across industries, the innovation agenda has expanded: formats are being reimagined, logistics and recycling infrastructure is catching up with design ambition. In the meantime, both consumer expectations and regulations are shifting. The question facing every packaging team today isn't whether to innovate, but how to identify what's commercially viable, scalable, and genuinely better – not just better on paper.

- **Material value:** How do businesses cut through the noise and make material decisions grounded in evidence rather than perception, and complement material switches with other solutions?
- **Operational redesign:** Innovative packaging solutions are only as good as the infrastructure behind it. How do brand owners make design decisions for today and tomorrow's operational realities?
- **Making the business case:** Packaging innovation and sustainability compete for budget against other business priorities. Which metrics actually resonate with the boardroom, and how to build a financial case that mitigates risk while generating value?

12:00pm-12:30pm **The role of labels: Traceability, compliance and consumer education**

The label is a crucial packaging component: It's the endpoint of supply chain traceability, a vehicle for consumer education, and increasingly a compliance obligation. The question isn't just what information belongs on pack, but how brands manage the growing gap between what they're required to disclose, what consumers actually understand, and what the brand wants to communicate. In this panel, we'll discuss labelling solutions that are quickly adaptable and cost-effective, as legislation continues to evolve.

- **What's in it, and what happens to it:** Consumers increasingly want to know the full story: ingredients, sourcing, and what to do with the packaging once they're done with it. How do brands communicate product and end-of-life information without confusion?
- **What to say, and how to say it:** The narrative that satisfies transparency requirements and sustainability reporting doesn't always translate to what a consumer needs at the point of purchase. We'll look at best practice for consumer communication that is both practical and informative.
- **Closing the gap between claim and reality:** Traceability commitments and 'recyclable' labels are only as credible as the facts and data behind them. How do businesses ensure they can back up what they're putting on pack?

12:30pm-1:30pm *Lunch*

1:30pm-3:00pm **Breakout Sessions**

At Innovation Forum, we take a unique, participatory learning approach to our breakout. Through diverse learning formats, we foster an intimate environment where everyone in the room contributes to the discussion.

	Stakeholder engagement and business resilience	Material and design choices	Internal alignment to scale innovation	Compliance and business resilience
1:30pm-2:15pm	Supply chain data: Best practice for collection, access and use-case	Paperization trends: A pragmatic look at the 'why' and 'how'	Procurement strategies: Solutions to ensure cost-savings and supply security	EPR compliance as competitive advantage: How leading brands understand policy levers
2:15pm-3:00pm	Collaborate to simplify, compete to differentiate: Playbook for cross-industry collaboration	Alternative feedstocks and new materials: Realistic pathways to increase uptake	R&D priorities: How to innovate under cost and compliance pressures	Between emission targets and operational realities: How to navigate the 'carbon challenge'

3:00pm-3:30pm *Networking break*

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3:30pm-5:00pm **Solution hubs**

In our 'Solution hubs' format, attendees have the chance to get best practice to leading organizations and contribute insights from their own business reality. Each 45-min session includes an introductory expert panel to set the context, followed by a group discussion for in-depth exchange of expertise.

	Stakeholder engagement and business resilience	Material and design choices	Internal alignment to scale innovation	Compliance and business resilience
3:30pm-4:15pm	From LCA to business case: How impact assessments drive decisions beyond reports	Recycled content integration: Progress, gaps and emerging technologies	Internal buy-in: Practical approaches to show the ROI from sustainability	AI and automation in sustainable packaging: Leading industry applications and strategic opportunities
4:15pm-5:00pm	From product protection to brand value: Packaging storytelling strategies	Every component counts: What it means to design with the full lifecycle in mind	Between the local and the global: Packaging strategies that work across borders	Future-proofing packaging portfolios: Format changes that work across the value chain

5:00pm-6:00pm **Closing remarks and networking drinks**

Day 2 – 28th October

9:00am–9:40pm **Circular economy as industrial strategy: How to build stronger value chains and local economies**

The circular economy has grown to be a valid proposition for the future of industry. Circularity is a lever for supply chain resilience, strengthening domestic supply chains: as [The Recycling Partnership](#) reports, better recycling infrastructure alone would generate an estimate of \$8.8 billion in secondary materials ready for local use. Investment in circular business models goes deeper than recycling: it's an opportunity to create jobs, open new market pockets, and scale innovation that improves efficiency metrics and elevates the customer experience.

The infrastructure to support the circular transition isn't always missing; in many localities, circular service providers are already operating and driving economic, social and environmental value. For businesses looking to adapt fast and be able to comply with evolving packaging regulation, working with what already exists on the ground may be the smartest first step. This session examines how policy, investment and cross-industry collaboration need to work together to generate returns from the circular economy.

- **The market conditions for a circular economy:** What are the key risk factors and opportunities that make circular economic models effective to mitigate current pressures?
- **The challenge:** Waste accumulates throughout production and after consumption, and moves across borders. How can we better understand waste streams, and what's needed to scale circular value chains and business models at a local and global level?
- **The opportunity:** A closer look at the incentives and concrete steps for government and businesses to invest in the transition to a circular economy and support innovation

9:40am–10:10am **Q&A with CalRecycle: What's the state of play in the largest US market?**

We'll be joined by director Zoe Heller from CalRecycle, California's Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery overseeing the state's efforts to scale a circular economy and reduce waste pollution.

Director Heller will provide an overview of the state of play in California's EPR implementation journey, followed by a live Q&A with the audience.

10:10am–10:40am *Networking break*

10:40am-11:15am **Reuse at scale: What works, what doesn't, and pathways forward**

California has set one of the most demanding reuse mandates in the world. Under SB 54, a portion of the required 25% reduction in single-use packaging must be achieved specifically through a shift to refillable or reusable systems ([CalRecycle, SB 54](#)). Fee obligations kick in from 2027, and packaging redesign cycles typically take three to five years. Yet, for the most part, reuse is still in pilot phase. Getting it to scale means solving for consumer behavior, reverse logistics and unit economics simultaneously.

The US doesn't need to start from scratch: there's a lot to learn from markets and localities where reuse infrastructure is already embedded in the system. This session examines what scaling reuse actually demands, and what it takes to make reuse a market reality.

- **Design for reuse:** Durability, standardization, logistics compatibility: what are the system non-negotiables, and where are organizations already getting it right?
- **Joining the dots:** Collection, cleaning, redistribution and tracking at scale requires coordination across the value chain. How do businesses build a commercially viable reuse system, and who takes ownership of the infrastructure that makes it work?
- **Learnings from markets ahead of the curve:** Examples of reuse systems in Europe and Canada show the real potential of reuse at retail and urban scale. We'll discuss what has worked in those markets, and how transferable the models are in the US context.

11:15am-11:50pm **Closing the loop: How to develop viable end markets for secondary materials?**

The story of recyclable packaging doesn't end at the bin. Retaining material value across the product lifecycle, securing supply chains against resource volatility, and meeting tightening compliance requirements all have a common denominator: functioning end markets for the recycle. Yet for many materials and formats, those markets remain underdeveloped, and regulators aren't waiting. Building solid end markets for secondary materials calls for proactivity in how different parts of the value chain — brands, MRFs, reclaimers, and policymakers — find their role and work in concert.

The pressure is real, but so is the opportunity: the carton sector shows what's possible when industry invests collectively in infrastructure and end markets, with household access to carton recycling growing from around 18% in 2009 to 63% today ([Waste Dive, 2026](#)). How can this example inform the development of sustainable end markets for other packaging materials? Who needs to do what, and where does the right expertise lie in the value chain? There's no single blueprint, but there are building blocks. This panel brings different perspectives together to discuss:

- **The infrastructure gap:** What does the business case for funding domestic recycling infrastructure actually look like, and what are effective ways to invest?
- **Supply chain resilience:** How do businesses make the link between circular material flows and a more stable, less import-dependent supply chain?

11:50am-12:30pm **Innovation that sells: translating consumer behavior into new market opportunities**

Across 11 countries and more than 11,000 consumers, McKinsey's 2025 packaging survey delivers a consistent message: when people shop, sustainability falls behind value and product quality in decision making ([McKinsey, Sustainability in Packaging 2025](#)). For packaging teams, that's not a reason to pull back, but a brief to get creative. This session explores how to read consumer data and behavior with purpose, and design packaging innovation that meets people where they are. Starting from case studies as proof points, the discussion will explore what it takes for sustainability solutions that scale.

- **Beyond the attitude-behavior gap:** Consumers say they care about sustainability, but buying decisions tell a different story. How do businesses design packaging innovation around what consumers actually do, rather than what they say?
- **What consumers really want from packaging:** Safety, shelf life and ease of use often outrank environmental impact as packaging priorities. How do you build a sustainability proposition that leads with the benefits consumers already value?
- **Segmentation as a strategic tool:** Attitudes and habits vary significantly by country, product category and channel. How do brands use granular consumer data to make smarter innovation bets rather than chasing a single global trend?

12:30pm-1:30pm *Lunch*

1:30pm - 3:20pm **Roundtables and closing plenary**

Roundtable A - **From data chaos to strategic vision:** A unified approach across LCA, carbon and EPR reporting

Roundtable B - **Out of sight, not out of scope:** Rethinking e-commerce and transport packaging

Roundtable C - **The opportunities in innovation:** Why technologies and materials that matter to stay ahead

Roundtable D - **Safety, quality, convenience:** Can sustainable innovation deliver on what people want?

Roundtable E - **Reuse and refill:** Closed loop VS retail scale solutions

Roundtable F - **Beyond the bottle:** The socioeconomic impact of deposit-return systems

Roundtable G - **More than a value:** How embedding sustainability drives business performance

Roundtable H - **Packaging as user-interface:** How consumer behavior data inform packaging strategy