Sustainable Packaging Innovation Forum 2026

North America

27-28 October | Chicago

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

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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

8:45am-8:50am **| *Welcome words*** *by Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair,* ***Innovation Forum***

8:50am-9:10am **| *Fireside chat***

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?

— Don Sparaco, president, US and Canada corrugated packaging, **Smurfit Westrock**

9:10am-9:50am **| *Panel***

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?

Speakers listed on the following page.

Speakers;

- Jason Bergquist, CEO, **RecycleMe**
- Chris Coady, director of funder engagement, **The Recycling Partnership**
- Jaclyn Bukas, sustainability manager, **ALDI USA**

Moderator: Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

9:50am-10:30am **| *Panel***

How to leverage packaging as an asset: Data, materials and what actually drives ROI

The question facing every packaging team today isn't whether to innovate, but how to identify what's commercially viable, compliant, and genuinely better for their portfolio — under cost and compliance pressures. Brands and retailers have doubled down on switches to paper, aluminum and glass packaging, but material substitution is just one piece of the puzzle. As regulations give some direction for what's possible or required, the innovation agenda has expanded; formats are being reimagined, balancing design and performance considerations with the right logistics and recycling solutions.

How do businesses cut through the noise and make packaging decisions grounded in evidence rather than perception, and complement material switches with other solutions? Considering both risk factors and opportunities, we'll discuss:

- **Data as a strategic asset**: How can brands use data more effectively to reduce EPR fees, and make packaging decisions that hold up commercially?
- **(Re)design choices:** How to best design for today's operational realities, while building the data foundations to adapt as regulations and infrastructure evolve?
- **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?

Speakers:

- Tina Nguyen, commercial development manager, **Reverse Logistics Group**
- William Singleton, director global packaging, innovation and sustainability, **Mars**

Moderator: Olga Kachook, Sustainable Packaging Coalition director, **GreenBlue Org**

10:30am-11:00am **|** *Networking break*

11:00am-11:20am **| *Lightning talks***

'We can't recycle our way out of the problem': What solutions really matter to advance circularity?

- *Speaker:* Tom Szaky, CEO, **TerraCycle**

'AI and automation in sustainable packaging': Leading industry applications and strategic opportunities

- *Speaker:* Matt Saunders, managing partner, **New Earth Ventures**

11:20am-12:00pm | ***Panel***

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 recyclate. 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, converters, 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*). Metal cans manufacturers and their value chain offer another proof point of material circularity at work, and PET has been working to build capacity in that direction too. How can these examples 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 together perspectives from different materials value chains to discuss:

- **The infrastructure gap:** What does the business case for funding waste management and 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?

Speakers:

- Jason Pelz, vice president sustainability US and Canada, **Tetra Pak**, and vice president of recycling, **Carton Council**
- Roxanne Sharif, director of sustainability, **Can Manufacturers Institute**
- Patricia Bonaguro, global sustainability manager, **Crown Holdings**

Moderator: Laura Stewart, executive director, **NAPCOR**

12:00pm-12:30pm | ***Recycling technology partner: Advanced recycling solutions***

More details to be announced soon...

- Zach Patterson, global Exxtend marketing manager, **ExxonMobil Signature Polymers**

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

1:30pm-3:00pm | ***Breakout sessions***

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

Track a. Material and design choices
Track b. What it takes to scale innovation
Track c. Compliance and business resilience

1:30pm-2:15pm	**Paperization trends:** A pragmatic look at the 'why' and 'how' - Sabrina Dixon-Ridges, director technology and development, rigid paper containers North America, **Sonoco** *Moderator:* Cait Green, Pack4Good brand engagement manager, **Canopy**	**The role of labels**: Traceability, compliance and consumer education - Yelena Mogelefsky, senior vice president of sourcing and production, **Komar Brands** - Rishi Banerjee, senior director and SmartLabel lead, **Consumer Brands Association** *Moderator:* Lia Da Giau, senior project manager, sustainable packaging, **Innovation Forum**	**EPR compliance as competitive advantage:** Key policy levers towards 2027 - **Ralph Lauren** *Moderator:* Alchemy Graham, policy director**, EPR Leadership Forum**
2:15pm-3:00pm	**Alternative feedstocks and new materials:** Realistic pathways to increase uptake - Chris Bradley, chief marketing officer and head of AI transformation, **Veritiv** *Moderator:* Shira Lane, founder and CEO, **Atrium 916**	**R&D priorities:** How to innovate under cost and compliance pressures - Phoebe Leppla, senior manager, R&D packaging development, **Molson Coors** - David Latimer, director of new product development, **Dart Container** - Ashish Datt, senior manager, innovation and sustainability, **Siegwerk** *Moderator:* Cory Connors, podcast founder and host, **Sustainable Packaging Podcast with Cory Connors**	**Future-proofing packaging portfolios:** Format changes that work across the value chain - Karin Witton, global head of sustainability, **Tosca** - Kristy Thomson, director global sourcing and compliance, packaging, **Floor and Décor** *Moderator:* Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

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

3:30pm-4:15pm ***| Solution hubs and case studies***

In our 'Solution hubs' format, attendees have the chance to hear best practice from 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.

**please note this agenda is subject to amendments

Track a. Material and design choices
Track b. What it takes to scale innovation
Track c. Compliance and business resilience

3:30pm-4:15pm ***Solution hubs***	**Right-sizing packaging sustainability:** What it means to design with the full lifecycle in mind - Paul Harris, product strategy and growth lead, **O-I** - Maurizio Carano, innovation and marketing director, **MCC Global IML** *Moderator:* Lia Da Giau, senior project manager, sustainable packaging, **Innovation Forum**	**Internal buy-in:** Practical approaches to show the ROI from sustainability - Amy Merli, sustainability specialist, **Lush** - John Garnett, senior vice president, technology, sustainability, and innovation, **Charter Next Generation** *Moderator:* Brendon Steele, vice president, **Future500**	**From LCA to business case:** How impact assessments drive decisions beyond reports - Mackenzie Crigger, sustainability manager, **International Paper** - Jonghun Park, director of The Centre for Packaging Innovation and Sustainability, **Toronto Metropolitan University** *Moderator:* Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**
4:15pm-5:00pm ***Case studies***	**'Design for recycling':** Why we need more dialogue between upstream and downstream - David Lickstein, senior director, global head of packaging innovation, sustainability and experience, **Kenvue** - Heather Turner, North America sustainability director, packaging and specialty plastics, **Dow** *Moderator:* Cory Connors, podcast founder and host, **Sustainable Packaging Podcast with Cory Connors**	**From product protection to brand value**: Packaging storytelling strategies ***More details soon...*** *Moderator:* Brendon Steele, vice president, **Future500**	**Hard-to-recycle packaging**: Lessons for cross-industry collaboration - Rachel Taplinger, head of sustainability, L'Oréal Dermatological Beauty USA, **L'Oréal** - Carly Snider, executive director, **Pact Collective** *Moderator:* Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

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

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

Day 2 – 28th October

8:45am-9:25pm | ***Opening panel***

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 corporate goals 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:** 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

Speakers

— Kyle Gitchell, circular economy development director,
Washington State Department of Commerce
— David Clark, chief sustainability officer, **Amcor**
— Erin Simon, vice president, plastic waste and business, **WWF**

9:25am-10:00am | ***Q&A***

In conversation 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.

Speaker: Zoe Heller, director, **CalRecycle**
Moderator: Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

10:00am-10:30am *Networking break*

10:30am-11:10am **| *Panel***

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.

Speakers:

— Ellen Jackowski, chief sustainability officer, **Mastercard**
— Brooke Anderson, director of public affairs, circular concept advisory, **Tomra**
— Olga Kachook, Sustainable Packaging Coalition director, **GreenBlue Org**

Moderator: Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

11:10am-11:50pm **| *Case study panel***

The network effect: What happens when the value chain moves together

As the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's 2030 Plastics Agenda makes clear, businesses face systemic barriers they cannot overcome alone in the redesign of the packaging system (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2025). Infrastructure gaps, regulatory requirements, and the question of how to innovate under cost pressures are shared problems. The companies making the most progress are those investing in pre-competitive collaboration to solve them collectively.

The challenge is knowing where to pool resources and where to compete - to keep the consumer experience diverse, engaging and brand-led while the system underneath gets simpler and more circular. This session explores what effective cross-industry collaboration looks like in practice, and how to engage without losing competitive edge.

- **Where collaboration creates value:** Which areas of the packaging system genuinely benefit from a pre-competitive approach, and how do businesses structure those partnerships without running into commercial or legal roadblocks?
- **Keeping the consumer experience alive:** As value chains collaborate to simplify backend systems, how do brands ensure the consumer-facing experience stays differentiated, innovative and engaging, rather than converging toward a lowest-common-denominator solution?
- **From working groups to real-world outcomes:** Cross-industry initiatives are only as good as what they deliver. What separates the collaborations that drive systemic change from the ones that stop at good intentions?

Speakers:

— Amanda Marti, US circularity lead, **McDonald's**
— Sarah Kircher, vice president sustainability, **Novolex**
— Jamal Booker, vice president global public affairs, communications and sustainability, McDonald's division, **The Coca-Cola Company**

Moderator: Ian Welsh, co-founder and chair, **Innovation Forum**

11:50am-12:30pm | ***Panel***
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 more sustainable solutions to 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?

Speakers:

— Neha Mallik, senior director of product management, future coffee systems, **Keurig Dr Pepper**
— Xinnan Li, vice president, analyst packaging and logistics, Raboresearch, **Rabobank**

Moderator: Susanne Shelton, sustainability communications consultant, I**ndependent**

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

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

Roundtable A – **Where smarter data cut reporting and compliance costs:** A unified approach to EPR, recyclability, and package design.

- Nathan McKee, sustainability analyst manager, **Trayak**

Roundtable B – **Between emission targets and operational realities:** How to navigate the 'carbon challenge'

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

- Marisa Damman, expert packaging engineer, sustainability**, Ferrara Candy Company**

Roundtable D – **Supply chain engagement for sustainability impact:** Are you asking suppliers the right questions?

Roundtable E – **Recycled content integration:** Progress, gaps and emerging technologies

Roundtable F – **More than a value:** How embedding sustainability drives business performance

- Desiree Portugues, senior production packaging designer, **Frida**

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

- Alyssa Harben, sustainable packaging teaching specialist and researcher, **Michigan State University**