REPORT: U.S. PACKAGING RECYCLING WOULD BENEFIT FROM EXTENDED PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY

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In those countries which have implemented them, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs for packaging have increased packaging recycling rates and could provide an effective policy for the U.S., according to a new report.

The report, Unfinished Business: The Case for Extended Producer Responsibility for Post-Consumer Packaging, said that EPR systems in Germany, Belgium, and Canada provide models, lessons and choices for the U.S. in its public policy debate on EPR for packaging.

Published by As You Sow, a U.S. not for profit organisation dedicated to promoting environmental responsibility through shareholder advocacy, the report noted that the U.S. generates more waste than any other country in the world but recycles far less than many other developed counties like Denmark, Belgium, and Germany.

According to the authors, post-consumer paper and paperboard and packaging, which together form the largest category of municipal solid waste, merit priority attention in efforts to improve extremely poor recycling rates for many post-consumer materials.

The report claimed that shifting financial responsibility for collecting and recycling used packaging in the U.S. from taxpayers to producers with the implementation of an EPR policy would incentivise producers to reduce the amount of packaging they create. The researchers added that such a policy would also substantially increase recycling rates, provide much needed revenue to improve recycling systems, reduce carbon footprint and energy use, and reclaim billions of dollars of embedded value which is currently landfilled.

Recovery rates

According to As You Sow, U.S. packaging recycling rates lag behind other developed countries by significant amounts and are estimated at 48.3% compared to 84% in Denmark and 73% in Germany.

However, the report did concede that there are some bright spots, such as paper recycling (more on paper recycling in Trash Talking on p37), but noted that aside from paper, just 22% of remaining packaging is recycled with only 12.1% of plastic packaging recycled.

Additionally, the authors highlighted beverage container recycling rates, which have dropped 20% over the last two decades, and added that one quarter of the U.S. population still doesn't have access to kerbside recycling.

"We believe U.S. producers must stop hiding from accountability and follow scores of other developed economies to accept responsibility for packaging," urged the authors.

Recommendations

Given its high consumption rates, As You Sow said that the U.S. should take action now to improve its waste collection infrastructure to capture a far greater amount of post-consumer materials and develop closed loop systems that will efficiently recycle these increasingly valuable materials.

According to the report packaging laws in Europe have diminished public antagonism to packaging waste, been responsible for a reduction in waste sent to disposal, and reduced costs to local authorities.

The researchers also said that praise for these systems has come from a major European packaging trade group whose members include prominent U.S. consumer goods companies Procter & Gamble and Kraft Foods.

The recommendations made in the report include:

Businesses that place substantial amounts of packaging on the U.S. market should take responsibility for collecting and recycling post-consumer packaging

Companies should prioritize engagement with peers as well as other stakeholders to reach agreement on binding producer responsibility legislation setting high packaging recovery goals for all individual kinds of packaging (75%+) and an aggressive timeline for meeting them

A successful mandated packaging EPR program in the U.S. should address all packaging types, be financed and managed by producers, set tough targets with enforceable penalties, receive equitable contributions from all waste producers with a transparent cost allocation and provide for no incineration of recyclable materials.