

## Issue Brief: Packaging

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### Overview:

Packaging is a critical component of almost every product on your shelves; it protects product quality, prevents damage and theft, and attracts customers' attention. Unfortunately, packaging design often does not adequately consider environmental impacts. As a result, many products over-packaged, which adds unnecessary cost, depletes natural resources, and generates waste. In the U.S. today, we generate **300 pounds** of packaging waste **per person** every year. Packaging and containers together represent almost one third of the U.S. waste stream. The best way to reduce packaging waste and natural resource depletion is to encourage suppliers to eliminate excess packaging. You can further decrease the environmental footprint of the packaging on your shelves by asking suppliers to increase post-consumer recycled content in packages and use packaging materials with low production energy and minimal toxic additives. If a package can be recycled, encourage suppliers to label it prominently so your customers know not to throw it away!

### Priority Concerns:

- **Excess packaging:** Extra boxes, package layers, etc. can be removed and headspace can be reduced without compromising product or package quality. Any packaging that can be removed without affecting package performance represents an environmental win.
- **Post-consumer content:** Ask suppliers to report post-consumer recycled content, which is the only type of recycled content that represents a real environmental improvement. **Suppliers describing** total "recycled content" usually combine the amount of *post-* and *pre-*consumer recycled content. Post-consumer recycled content is the percentage of material collected from recycle bins and used to make new packaging. Pre-consumer content is the percentage of material recovered during the manufacturing process and repurposed.
- **Recovery rates:** Many materials have the potential to be recycled, but are not actually being recovered and recycled in practice. Also, some materials that have high rates of recovery in some applications may have much lower rates of recovery when used in other package types. Ask suppliers to report recovery rates for the specific type of package they are using.
- **PVC Plastic:** PVC plastic poses serious environmental concerns throughout its lifecycle.
- **Toxic additives** such as chlorine and lead are required to produce PVC
- **Toxic pollution** can be released during production and incineration of PVC
- **Flexible applications** of PVC use plasticizers including phthalates, which are suspected to pose risks to human development and reproductive systems.
- **PVC is recycled at extremely low rates**, and can hinder the successful recycling of other plastics if a PVC item is mistakenly melted down with other plastics (e.g. PET) and contaminates the batch.
- **PLA and other biopolymers:** PLA and other 'compostable' biopolymers are being advertised as a 'green alternative' to conventional plastics because they are made from 'renewable' plant material and can be composted at the end of their lifecycle. In fact, these *biopolymers may not be the best choice*, because they are usually disposed of in landfills (where they will not biodegrade), and are energy-intensive to produce (because they are made out of crops like corn that are grown using lots of non-renewable fuels).

### What Can You Do?

#### Ask Questions

- Ask suppliers what actions they are taking to remove unnecessary packaging and reduce overall packaging volume and weight.
- Ask suppliers which packaging materials they are using, and why those materials are the best environmental choices.
- Find out the percentage of post-consumer recycled content in packaging materials, ask what suppliers are doing to increase the percentage of post-consumer recycled content in their packages.
- Ask suppliers about the U.S. EPA recovery rates for the specific package type and material they are using.

### What Now?

Some important considerations regarding sustainability and product choices include:

- Does this choice significantly reduce the environmental impacts across the lifecycle of this product?
- Is there a business opportunity to generate increased cost savings and improve customer satisfaction?

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Environmental Defense Fund is about solutions – And we're here to help! Please give us a call:  
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