



Business report: Plastic packaging re-think needed

The first-ever study on NZ's entire plastic packaging system highlights how even radically improved recycling will not solve all its problems. New Zealanders need to rethink the way we make, use and dispose of plastic packaging.

New Zealand's Plastic Packaging System – An Initial Circular Economy Diagnosis was prepared by the Sustainable Business Network's (SBN) Circular Economy Accelerator. It highlights how no one entity can solve the issues associated with plastic packaging. A co-ordinated circular economy approach is required, which tackles the root causes of the problem not just individual symptoms.

In a circular economy the life cycles of materials are maximised, usage optimised and at the end of life, all materials are reutilised so that nothing is wasted. This presents a viable and prosperous alternative to the dominant linear, 'take, make, waste' system.

The study was led by James Griffin of SBN's Circular Economy Accelerator.

"There has been an explosion in the use of plastic packaging in the last 60 years because it is relatively cheap, lightweight and durable. Unfortunately, systems to properly manage it have not kept pace. This has led to a global waste and pollution crisis, including here in New Zealand. More recently, the stresses in our system were highlighted when China effectively closed its doors to the world's waste."

The study identifies measures to significantly increase recycling rates such as reduction in the types and formats of plastics used, more on-shore processing facilities, consistent collections around the country, increasing demand for recycled materials and a container deposit scheme.

James cautions that, although such measures offer opportunities to improve the situation, recycling alone cannot solve the issues associated with plastic packaging.

"There needs to be a wider approach, for example, problematic and unnecessary plastic packaging needs to be identified and eliminated from our supply chains. Reuse models need to be adopted and scaled as an alternative to single-use plastics."

The SBN study drew on global research by the UK's Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF), as well as more than 40 interviews with key stakeholders across NZ's plastic packaging system. The work was supported by 10 major New Zealand businesses. Many of them have signed up to The New Plastics Economy Global Commitment, developed by EMF and UN Environment. This has 290+ signatories, representing 20% of the world's plastic packaging production.

The Commitment includes targets for eliminating problematic or unnecessary plastic packaging. It involves moving from single-use to reusable packaging. It aims to stimulate new ways to ensure all packaging can be easily and safely reused, recycled, or composted by 2025. Another goal is to significantly increase the amounts of plastics reused or recycled and made into new packaging. The targets are set to be tightened over time. Participants are required to publish annual progress reports. The SBN study was partly designed as a foundation piece to help enable participating business to meet these commitments and go beyond them. The report provides 47 recommendations to achieve a new comprehensive nationwide plastic packaging system that works. The top recommendations are as follows:

Individual businesses need to:

- audit the types and amounts of plastic packaging they use. This should find out the types of plastics being used and identify problematic single use plastics
- set bold targets to design out problematic packaging and enable dramatically improved recycling
- support suppliers providing packaging formats with high levels of recycled content

The business sector also needs to work together to:

- expand the market for recycled materials
- develop product stewardship schemes for rigid plastics

And the government needs to:

- develop and implement a comprehensive plastic packaging strategy with bold and ambitious targets

Plastic packaging features significantly in many New Zealand businesses. Adopting a circular economy approach will enable them to address the very real concerns of their customers. It will help them see beyond recycling so they can help prevent unnecessary resource usage, minimise waste and prevent pollution.

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The full report can be viewed at: www.circulareconomy.org.nz

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