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# What will it take to change packaging recycling in the U.S.?

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The recycling rate in the U.S. has been stuck in a rut, slowly inching up year by year, a signal that any major increases will need to be spurred by major actions.

Those on all sides of the issue may agree that changes need to be made to recycling systems, but a recent dustup over a trade group's position paper shows they're not seeing eye-to-eye on some ideas.

Take extended producer responsibility (EPR). It's the concept that makes those who produce items also responsible for funding (and sometimes also operating) recycling systems for those same items.

For brands it means added costs, but also incentives to use easily and readily recyclable material. For governments, it shifts away some waste disposal and recycling expenses. And for recyclers, it means possible changes to the way they operate as well as potential new or expanded material streams.

The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI), a major player on the pro-EPR side, recently got a glimpse at a position paper by AMERIPEN, a packaging-focused trade group, and called out a number of statements in the paper as misleading or false. While AMERIPEN finalizes a report about recycling systems for packaging, it maintains its goal is to advance recycling improvements. That's the same aim of the PSI, although what seems to be missing from the debate is actual discussion and consensus.

More than half of the states already have a variety of EPR laws on the books covering products such as batteries, paint, thermostats, electronics and fluorescent lights. While some date back to the '90s, efforts to put EPR systems for packaging in place have developed more recently. The latest action has been taken in Rhode Island, where legislation has been introduced but is being held for further study.

The PSI has been working on packaging EPR for about five years, said CEO Scott Cassel, and was one of the first groups to try to involve the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. The PSI has also sought to work with brand owners, state and local governments, and other stakeholders.

Since then, Cassel said, there have been a number of scattershot efforts by others. "While there

have been and continue to be initiatives on this in the U.S.," he said, "they are all separate. They are all disparate efforts."

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The EPA opened up a dialogue among companies, governments and a few non-profits. "While there was data on the table and much learning," Cassel said, "it was not set up for agreements, it was not set up to include all the different stakeholders, and because of that it was very limited in its scope and its results."

Nestle Waters co-founded Recycling Reinvented, a non-profit that supports the EPR model and recently commissioned a study on the economics of packaging and paper EPR systems.

Alcoa led the creation of an initiative called Action to Accelerate Recycling, to look into how companies voluntarily can support packaging recovery and recycling.

And AMERIPEN was founded and has been conducting research on recycling systems. "The project objective for studying EPR systems was to produce a comprehensive paper that evaluates funding systems to support improved packaging end of life scenarios, including increased recovery," said Jeff Wooster, AMERIPEN secretary and Dow Chemical's global sustainability leader. "This evaluation will include programs that are industry owned and will explore different faces of EPR and evaluate both successful and challenged elements of various programs."

PSI, for all its efforts, has found brand owners reluctant to enter in discussions. "They are still learning about these issues. They are very preliminary in their understanding about what their responsibilities might be," Cassel said.

Waste management companies also have been reluctant to join the push for EPR, as it could change the way they operate. Commodities groups, meanwhile, have been more supportive of bottle bills, which put deposits on containers, giving consumers a high incentive to return them to get that deposit back.

Within all those efforts by different groups and companies, Cassel said, there has yet to be a discussion that brings together everyone that should be involved: brands, commodities, waste management, government, environmental groups and other experts.

"Until that takes place, the opportunities for advancement of recycling in the United States will be stalled," Cassel said.

At the same time, it creates a breeding ground for misinformation about EPR or other recycling systems.

AMERIPEN, created in late 2010 to focus on packaging policies, is finalizing a report based on research into EPR systems, expecting to release it to its members in a couple of months.

"AMERIPEN supports efforts to optimize recycling programs and increase recycling rates and believes that decisions on how to best achieve those objectives should be based on data and sound science," Wooster said. "The first steps in understanding what programs will be most effective are thoroughly researching different alternatives, documenting those learnings, and

sharing those research results with members for their consideration."

Late last year, the group wrote up an internal position paper, giving initial thoughts on EPR. The PSI recently got a look at that paper and took issue with a number of statements in it, particularly where the paper says, "research on programs currently in place around the globe demonstrate that the goals of an EPR system in the U.S. will probably not be met."

Cassel says that no one overriding goal is being touted by EPR advocates, and that supporters have a number of goals in mind, all more or less equal:

- Financial savings by shifting the cost of recycling from taxpayers and governments to companies
- Products designed with disposal in mind
- Fairness by spreading the expenses related to items among all those involved
- Environmental results such as increased recycling rates and diversion from landfills
- Recycling jobs, hopefully created due to increased amounts and types of materials being collected

What's more, Cassel pointed out that there are packaging EPR laws in more than 30 European countries along with laws in some provinces in Canada and other places such as Japan and Brazil.

"They wouldn't spread worldwide if they weren't working," he said.

The question everyone seems to be trying to answer is whether those same or similar laws can be made to work in the U.S. and what it will take to get there.

But the only way they'll get there is to answer that question together.

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