Designing Packaging for EPR

What is EPR?

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) is a policy approach that shifts the financial and operational responsibility for managing post-consumer waste from local governments to the producers of goods. In the context of packaging, EPR requires manufacturers to take responsibility for the collection, recycling, and proper disposal of their packaging once it has reached the end of its lifecycle. This model aims to reduce environmental impact by encouraging producers to design products and packaging that are easier to recycle, reuse, or compost, ultimately driving a more circular economy.

Emerging Legislation

- **California Senate Bill 54 (SB 54) / Assembly Bill 1080** – California's SB 54 and AB 1080, passed in 2022, are landmark pieces of legislation aimed at reducing single-use plastic waste and increasing the state's recycling efforts. The bills set strict targets for plastic waste reduction, with a goal to reduce plastic pollution by 75% by 2030.
- **Colorado Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Law** - Colorado's EPR law, passed in 2023, holds producers accountable for managing the lifecycle of packaging and paper products. The law requires producers to pay into a recycling program that funds the collection, sorting, and recycling of packaging materials.
- **EU Single-Use Plastics Directive (SUP Directive) (EU 2019/904)** – The EU's Single-Use Plastics (SUP) Directive, enacted in 2019, aims to reduce the environmental impact of plastic waste by banning specific single-use plastic items and promoting sustainable alternatives.

Key Considerations for Packaging Design

Adapting packaging to meet EPR requirements will not only ensure regulatory compliance but also open the door to innovation. By investing in packaging design for recyclability and reusability, companies can help create positive, long-term environmental impact while meeting both consumer and regulatory expectations.

Material Selection

- Use of recyclable, reusable, or compostable materials aligned with EPR guidelines.
- Prioritize PCR content to meet regulatory targets and reduce risk.

Labeling/Communication

- Clear labeling to guide consumers in proper disposal and recycling practices.
- Include QR codes or links for detailed disposal guidance.
- Avoid greenwashing—align claims with actual local infrastructure.

Packaging Design

- Focus on durability, potential for reuse, and reducing waste.
- Minimize packaging size and weight (e.g., downgauging, eliminating excess).
- Design for recyclability: avoid mixed materials.

Contact us

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Benefits of EPR-Compliant Packaging Design

For brands and materials providers, adapting to the ever-evolving EPR landscape is not just about compliance—it is an opportunity to position your organization as a leader by creating packaging that aligns with principles of the circular economy.

EPR compliance offers significant benefits to companies, including the avoidance of fines and penalties associated with non-compliance. By adhering to EPR regulations, businesses can avoid costly fees while also realizing cost savings through more efficient, sustainable packaging materials that reduce waste and enhance recycling efforts.

Compliant companies often build stronger consumer loyalty, as today's consumers increasingly prefer brands that demonstrate environmental responsibility.

Additionally, embracing EPR can position a company as an industry leader in sustainability, boosting its reputation and opening up new markets. Innovation in packaging design to meet EPR standards can unlock opportunities to attract new consumer segments, differentiate products, and stay ahead of regulatory changes, creating long-term value.

OSC Member Spotlight: Elk Packaging

Elk Packaging stands at the forefront of helping brands navigate the rapidly evolving landscape of Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR). With decades of experience in sustainable material development, the team at Elk is seeing a mixed response among its clients as they grapple with the uncertain policy horizon.

Many brands are currently in a "wait and see" mode—cautious about making major shifts in packaging amid rising costs of goods and a patchwork of evolving regulations. A few early movers, however, are proactively preparing for EPR by rethinking their packaging portfolios. Elk works closely with both groups, offering strategic counsel that balances near-term compliance risk with long-term sustainability goals.

"For many of our clients, the biggest question right now is: what's the safest packaging decision we can make without knowing exactly how policy will land?" says Jeanne Cloutier, Director of Sustainability Projects at Elk Packaging. "We're helping them make smart, incremental shifts—like maximizing PCR content—that keep them compliant and flexible." Indeed, post-consumer recycled (PCR) content is one of today's most reliable "safe bets."

While it may not carry the same marketing appeal as compostable options, PCR helps brands meet anticipated mandates without locking into formats that could fall out of favor depending on final legislation. Compared to specialty recyclable or compostable films—both of which come with labeling limitations and infrastructure concerns—PCR offers lower risk and higher resilience.

Elk supports clients in evaluating material tradeoffs, identifying the right blend of recyclability, PCR, and cost-efficiency based on their leadership priorities and sustainability ambitions. Through close collaboration with brands of all sizes, Elk continues to deliver packaging strategies that are grounded in regulatory insight, consumer trends, and practical execution—ensuring their clients are not only EPR-compliant but also well-positioned for leadership in a circular economy.

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