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PLASTICS INDUSTRY URGES REEVALUATION OF SOUTH AFRICA'S ON-PACK RECYCLING LABELS (OPRLS)

Johannesburg, 31 October 2024. The implementation of On-Pack Recycling Labels (OPRLs) in South Africa was envisioned as a pivotal move to enhance consumer comprehension of packaging recyclability. Introduced in 2019 with support from the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), these guidelines aimed to deliver uniform, clear instructions on managing packaging waste.

Clear Guidance for Consumers

Annabe Pretorius, Executive: Technical Operations at Plastics SA explains that OPRLs are visual cues directly printed on packaging, designed to inform consumers about the recyclability of a product.

"This streamlined communication was intended to facilitate proper disposal of packaging and boost recycling rates nationwide. Each component of the packaging is covered by the labels, aiming to eliminate confusion and simplify recycling decisions," she states.

Collaboration and Implementation

The guidelines, developed in collaboration with the SA Plastics Pact and partners, encouraged brand owners and retailers to adopt them uniformly. The goal was that consistent application across various brands would clarify how consumers should manage packaging, thereby enhancing recycling rates.

Concerns About Current Guidelines

Despite initial expectations, Pretorius raises concerns over certain aspects of the guidelines, especially the 30% threshold set to classify recyclability. She highlights that many recyclable products in South Africa fall below this cut-off, cautioning that advising consumers against recycling these items undermines the recycling industry, leads to consumer confusion, and prevents valuable materials from reaching recyclers.

"Plastics SA tracks recycling rates by packaging material, while the OPRL links products to these rates. However, using the 30% threshold as a strict go/no-go criterion seems impractical given the lack of data for every individual product," she says.

Emphasising the crucial role collectors play in the recycling value chain, Pretorius also highlights their responsibility to sort and send materials that recyclers require. "If a sufficient quantity of a specific material is collected, it will generate market demand. This is why we oppose the 30% limit. Our message to consumers should be straightforward: if it's a clean, mono-layer, mono-material plastic product, recycle it."

Need for Ongoing Education

Plastics SA underscores the necessity of continuous education for collectors, recyclers, and consumers. "Newly designed recyclable products, like mono-layer pouches, might not be collected due to lack of awareness. Perfectly recyclable products won't be recycled if not collected. If waste pickers and collectors assume certain materials are non-recyclable, they risk losing valuable resources, even when these have been redesigned for recyclability," Pretorius notes.

A Call for Clarity

While the original intention of OPRLs was to simplify recycling for consumers and increase recycling rates, this has not always been the outcome. Pretorius questions the effectiveness of the labels in engaging consumers. "Our message needs to be clear: if it's plastic, rinse it and recycle it," she concludes.

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