

SOUTH AFRICA'S PLASTIC PACKAGING INDUSTRY AND THE EUROPEAN UNION'S NEW PACKAGING REGULATIONS

The European Union's Packaging & Packaging Waste Regulation (PPWR) has introduced new regulations for plastic packaging that could have significant ripple effects on South Africa's plastics and packaging sectors. As global sustainability requirements evolve, South African packaging manufacturers must adapt to remain competitive, particularly in export markets.

Recyclability by 2030: A South African Perspective

The PPWR mandates that all packaging must be recyclable by design and practice by 2030. Fortunately, South Africa's plastics industry, especially for export-oriented businesses, has already made substantial progress in meeting these recyclability standards.

According to Anton Hanekom, Executive Director at Plastics SA, "South Africa has made great strides in designing for recyclability, and our local packaging designers, brand owners, and retailers are consciously developing products with end-of-life considerations in mind."

Efforts to include recycled content where possible have seen significant investment in infrastructure, technology, and expertise. South African manufacturers are successfully exporting plastic packaging to international clients, demonstrating compliance with global standards.

Post-Consumer Recycled Content: Progress and Challenges

A key requirement of the PPWR is the gradual increase of post-consumer recycled (PCR) content in plastic packaging from 2030 onwards. South Africa has already achieved considerable progress in this area, with PET bottles already successfully being recycled back into bottles, trays and punnets used for food contact. Hanekom acknowledges the challenges, stating, "While South Africa is making strides in recycling PET bottles, scaling up food-grade PCR production and enhancing recycling capabilities remain areas that require further investment. Ongoing investment in research and development (R&D) is critical to overcoming these hurdles and expanding the use of PCR across various packaging formats".

A greater focus for South Africa needs to be fixing our broken waste management system. As Hanekom explains: "We can (and do) have packaging products that are 100 % designed for recycling. However, it is of little use if it is not picked up by waste pickers or collected by waste management companies. To this end Plastics SA has been engaging with local and national governments to educate them about proper waste management and encourage improved collection. This is less of an issue in Europe where waste management is a priority service to home owners and energy from waste and chemical recycling is more of a reality. In South Africa, we are focussed on manual collection, mechanical recycling and job creation – hence our different approach and appeals for improved infrastructure".

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Eco-Modulated Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) Fees

The PPWR also introduces eco-modulated EPR fees, which incentivise sustainable designs and penalise non-compliance. Hanekom highlights that South Africa is beginning to see the benefits of its own EPR system, with Producer Responsibility Organisations (PROs) managing funds to enhance collection and recycling efforts.

"EPR has led to a notable increase in the collection and recycling of post-consumer packaging, alongside growing consumer awareness. As we refine the system, annual fee reviews ensure that lessons are incorporated to enhance collection and recycling efficiency."

Ensuring Compliance for Export Markets

Non-compliance with the PPWR presents a major risk for South African exporters of plastic packaging or packaged products destined for the EU, potentially leading to market restrictions. To address this, the local plastics industry is proactively enhancing product design and increasing recycled content.

"Plastics SA is committed to assisting businesses in navigating the compliance landscape," Hanekom affirms. "We provide guidance on aligning with international legislation and maintaining competitiveness in the EU market."

Innovation and Collaboration: The Path Forward

The PPWR is widely regarded as a catalyst for innovation, driving the development of circular economy solutions. South Africa's plastics industry can seize this opportunity to innovate in areas such as advanced recycling technologies, mono-material packaging solutions, and 100% recyclable designs.

Hanekom highlights the need for continued collaboration: "Achieving circularity requires a concerted effort between industry bodies, government, and academia. Together, we can accelerate progress toward sustainable packaging solutions."

Conclusion

South Africa's plastics industry is well-positioned to align with the EU's new packaging regulations through ongoing investments in design, recyclability, and sustainability initiatives. With continued collaboration and innovation, the industry can not only comply with international regulations but also lead the way in sustainable packaging solutions for the future.

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