



National approach to reducing plastic food packaging

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In 2019, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau committed to reduce plastic pollution and to take steps to ban harmful single-use plastics.

The focus on reducing plastics is not new, nor is it unique to Canada. In 2018, the G7 Ocean Plastics Charter, to which Canada is a signatory, was introduced. Through it, countries and industry stakeholders committed to ensure that plastics are designed for repair, reuse, recycling, and are recovered at end-of-life to prevent waste and pollution. Signatories aimed to increase recycled content by at least 50 per cent in plastic products; to recycle and reuse at least 55 per cent of plastic packaging; and to move towards 100 per cent reusable, recyclable or recoverable plastics, by 2030.

Also, in 2018 the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment developed the Canada-wide Strategy Zero Plastic Waste. Key elements of that strategy include extending producer responsibility for packaging, reducing the use of single-use and disposable products, introducing national performance requirements and standards and incenting a circular economy.

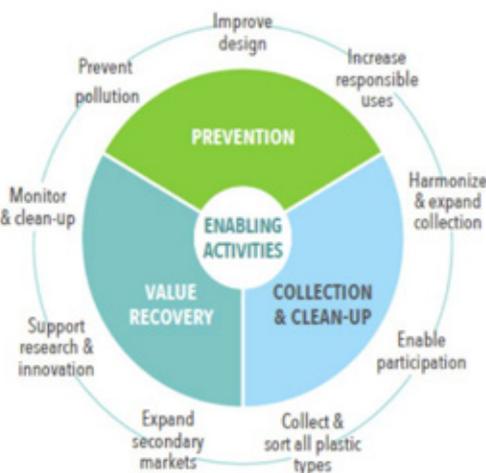
While COVID-19 limited progress on governments' commitments to reduce plastic waste, the federal government is expected to reaffirm this as a priority this fall.

Plastic pollution is an important environmental issue. Every year, Canadians throw away over three million tonnes of plastic waste, with less than 11 per cent of plastics being recycled. While food packaging is just one component of the plastics waste stream, it is "high profile"

— ubiquitous in consumers' homes and found in residential waste and recycling boxes across the country.

Eliminating plastic waste from the environment is a complex but important priority. Here in Canada, it will require federal, provincial and municipal governments to work closely with waste management stakeholders, packaging manufacturers and plastics users to achieve national solutions. It will also require a thoughtful discussion regarding packaging alternatives — packaging serves an important purpose for portion control, convenience and food safety. Where we cannot eliminate packaging, we need to encourage and incent the development of new and innovative packaging options that reduce our reliance on single-use plastics.

Main Areas for Action for a Circular Plastics Economy in Canada



Source: Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment Canada-wide Strategy Zero Plastic Waste

Key to achieving the federal government's objectives will also be ensuring Canada's waste management systems are primed to accept new packaging solutions. Currently, there are inconsistent approaches to recycling and organics collection across the country. Standards and targets for plastics collection, recycling and recycled content requirements need to be set nationally to ensure consistency across Canada and to better support consumer understanding and participation in packaging diversion systems.

Recently, the National Research Council (NRC) hosted a Nationwide Sustainable Packaging Workshop, organized to discuss barriers to, and opportunities for, making Canada's plastic food packaging system more sustainable. The Workshop recognized the need for a systems approach to reducing plastic food packaging — from the need for new and cost-effective packaging materials, to consumer behaviour, to effective and consistent waste collection and recovery systems.

Also highlighted at the event was the work of the Canadian Produce Marketing Association (CPMA), whose CEO Ron Lemaire delivered the event's keynote address. CPMA has undertaken a range of research looking at the use of packaging in Canada's fresh produce sector. CPMA has also developed tools for industry — including the CPMA Plastics Packaging Roadmap and the CPMA Preferred Plastics Guide.

A collaborative approach — between governments and with industry — will be critical to successfully reducing plastic food packaging in Canada and to identify innovative alternatives. As this work progresses, food and beverage companies are also encouraged to work with their packaging suppliers to explore options for reducing their environmental footprints. ●

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