P&G, Burt's Bees, TSC, Colgate-Palmolive, and More Form First Coalition to Tackle Recycling Small Format Packaging

The Sustainability Consortium (TSC) announced today the formation of a new coalition of companies and organizations committed to creating resources to recycle small format packaging and other materials. This is the first coalition of its kind to include CPG companies, non-profits and universities. TSC, alongside TSC members and partners from P&G, Burt's Bees, Colgate-Palmolive, GSK, Sustainable Packaging Coalition, The Recycling Partnership, Balcones Resources, University of Arkansas, and Arizona State University are collaborating to accelerate progress on building increased circularity of small format packaging of all material types through science-based, collective action projects.

The Association of Plastics Recyclers (APR) defines small format products and packaging as items smaller than 2" in two dimensions and has developed related sortability protocols for further testing. The Ellen MacArthur Foundation (EMF) estimates that 10% of all packaging by weight is small format. Small format is currently unrecyclable in most curbside recycling programs due to the size of the screens used for sorting within Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs). As a result of these challenges, the majority of small format is going to landfill or has the potential to become litter, rather than being captured as valuable material that can be used in other products and packaging through a more circular path.

Jennifer Park, TSC collective action manager states, "This is an exciting collaboration of corporate, NGO, recycling, and university thought leaders coming together to address a complex issue across the consumer goods industry and communities. The work is already providing important insights into how to improve the circularity of small format."

Small format items are made from a variety of materials including paper, glass, metal, and plastic. Examples of the plastic applications that are manufactured in small format include caps not able to be reattached to the bottle, trial size bottles, sample foodservice tubs, and cosmetics including small tubes, as well as toys, gadgets, and other ancillary items such as utensils made from PET, HDPE, PP, and other resin types.

"Burt's Bees has worked incredibly hard over the years to use less packaging, to be a leading brand in our use of recycled content, and to design packaging that is recyclable. However, addressing the recycling of small format packaging, which represents a large proportion of our portfolio, requires a systemic approach. We're hopeful that this coalition will identify meaningful, scalable solutions," said Matt Kopac, Associate Director, Sustainability.

Companies are increasingly setting goals to make 100% of their products and packaging recyclable, reusable, or compostable by 2025 to align with such programs as the Ellen MacArthur Foundation New Plastics Economy, as well as to meet consumer demand.

“While many non-recyclable items can be made recyclable through better and more modern design, essential everyday items such as toothbrushes, trial sizes for a variety of products, and small packaging for new concentrated product forms, use minimal material. Rather than make them larger and use additional material, we are hopeful that a technological solution to effectively recycle these materials can be found through unprecedented collaboration.”
-Anne Bedarf, Global Packaging Sustainability Manager

TSC and Arizona State University’s InnovationSpace partnered in 2020 to better understand the system in which small format is managed. Students and faculty assessed how small format materials are captured, hauled, and separated in MRFs to better understand the problem and identify roadblocks to more material being collected and recycled.

Moving forward, TSC and its partners will lead a coalition to 1) preform a waste characterization study of small format, including a projection of the volume and scale of collection to estimate economic value and 2) model and test MRF secondary sortation technologies and capabilities. TSC translates the best sustainability science into business tools that are used all over the world to create more sustainable consumer products.

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About TSC
The Sustainability Consortium (TSC) is a global non-profit organization transforming the consumer goods industry to deliver more sustainable consumer products. We work to enable a world where people can lead fulfilled lives in a way that decouples their impacts on people and the planet. Our members and partners include manufacturers, retailers, suppliers, service providers, NGOs, civil society organizations, governmental agencies and academics. TSC convenes our diverse stakeholders to work collaboratively to build science-based decision tools and solutions that address sustainability issues that are materially important throughout a product’s supply chain and lifecycle. TSC also offers a portfolio of services to help drive effective improvement and implementation. Formed in 2009, TSC is jointly administered by Arizona State University and the University of Arkansas and has a European office at Wageningen University and Research in the Netherlands. For more information visit www.sustainabilityconsortium.org.

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