

Extended Producer Responsibility & How It Can Miss the Mark in Reducing Plastic Waste

When properly planned and executed, Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs can improve recycling rates and reduce plastic waste.

What is Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)?

EPR is a tool used to describe policies that require producers to manage the entire life-cycle of the products they manufacture. EPR programs can cover any type of material, as well as finished products such as tires, mattresses, carpet, batteries, paint, and more.

How do Extended Producer Responsibility policies work?

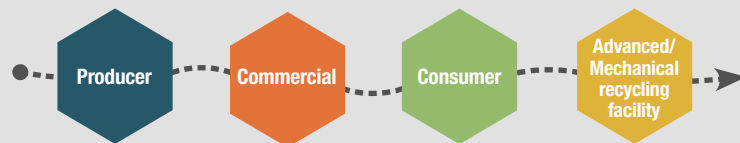
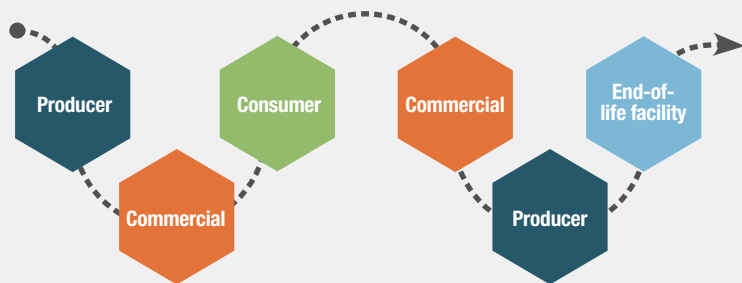
EPR policies set targets, either for collection or recycling, and define how to measure desired outcomes to ensure that goals are met. Funds from EPR programs should be reinvested in recycling systems and infrastructure expansion to achieve waste reduction goals. When designed in collaboration with industry and government, EPR programs can create accountability through these targets and goals and ensure success by funding necessary infrastructure. However, the efficacy of these programs is heavily dependent on how they are implemented at the municipal, state, and, occasionally, federal levels.

How do Extended Producer Responsibility policies work?

EPR

VS

Advanced/Mechanical Recycling



Challenges with EPR

The goal of EPR is not to impose fees on producers – policy models that misunderstand this tend to have unintended consequences for consumers and don't actually reduce waste or increase recycling rates. For example, [research](#) suggests that New York's EPR legislation could cost \$803.2 million annually, adding up to \$57 per month in grocery costs for the average family of four in New York State. The New York model diverts most derivative EPR program funds to waste haulers and material recovery facilities. Rather than investing in a system to process or reuse collected material, this type of model prioritizes collection and exacerbates waste challenges with consumers paying the price, literally. Alternatively, correctly implemented programs that set reasonable targets and allocate funds to ensure the outcomes sought are actually achieved tend to avoid the pitfalls of underfunded recycling systems and unreasonable targets.

In Germany, a decades-long printing, paper and packaging (PPP)-focused EPR program was [unable](#) to make a difference in the country's increasing per capita packaging waste rate. Alternatively, governments that have correctly implemented EPR policies, like [British Columbia](#), Canada, have been able to significantly increase recycling rates by engaging and working with industry to support the best strategy that leads to the most significant change. EPR policies can work, but they must involve the parties that they impact.

Complements to EPR

Correctly implemented EPR policies that focus on mechanisms to increase funding for traditional and innovative recycling systems are vital to reducing plastic waste and supporting circular economy initiatives. We already know these solutions work. Mechanical recycling programs, complemented by [Advanced Recycling Technologies](#) (ARTs) that transform hard-to-recycle plastics like plastic film, textiles and building materials into new products, offer growing job opportunities and ultimately benefit consumers and society. Local and state governments can expand support for traditional recycling programs, while also working to pass legislation that better defines ART processes and encourages investment in ART including through offering tax incentives. Together, mechanical recycling and ARTs, supported by appropriate EPR laws, can reduce waste and contribute to a more circular economy.