

PRESS RELEASE

Taking stock of successes, failures and challenges in recycling – how we make sure packaging is fit for high-quality recycling

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The share of packaging fit for high-quality recycling is on the rise, with most statutory recycling targets being met by the dual systems. However, there were also serious shortfalls to the statutory quotas in 2022. The Zentrale Stelle Verpackungsregister (Central Agency Packaging Register – ZSVR) and the German Environment Agency (UBA) hosted a joint press conference in Berlin to reflect on what has changed since the Verpackungsgesetz (Packaging Act) entered into force five years ago and take a look at the road ahead – including roadblocks and how to overcome them.

In 2022, the dual systems met – and in some cases even significantly exceeded – the very demanding statutory recycling targets for packaging made of paper/paperboard/cardboard, tinfoil, aluminium and plastic, meaning that substantial volumes of these materials were transferred for high-quality recycling. For plastic packaging, for example, the share of materials actually recovered through mechanical recycling was 4.5 percentage points over the minimum statutory quota at 67.5 percent. Four years ago, this figure was well below 50 percent.

Looking at the average across all of the dual systems, the statutory recycling targets for glass packaging, beverage cartons and other composite packaging were substantially undershot in some cases. However, more than 50 percent of waste collected from yellow bins was transferred for recycling. Bettina Rechenberg, Head of Division at the UBA, commented that: *‘It’s still true: separating waste is worthwhile. We’re pleased about the great recycling wins the dual systems have secured, especially for metal and plastic packaging. What’s of major concern to us now is really other composite packaging and inadequate collection volumes for glass packaging. Consumers are unfortunately still not bringing enough waste glass to the dedicated collection containers.’*

Glass collection volumes too low

According to a study by the UBA, glass packaging is in principle suitable for high-quality recycling as long as it does not have any unusual design features, such as opaque paints. It can generally be melted down and used again and again in new glass packaging. However, even the best design will not help if empty glass ends up in residual waste after use. It must be in the glass bin, sorted by colour, to be recycled. Among the reasons for lower collection volumes are an underemphasis on waste separation and dwindling places for glass bins. As a result, the volumes recovered by recycling plants are declining and valuable used glass goes to waste. Compared to the previous year, the share of recycled glass fell 3.4 percentage points despite the fact that the Verpackungsgesetz required a significant increase.

Composite packaging concerns

Other composite packaging is often not good for recycling according to a study by the UBA. Nearly every other article of packaging with less than 90 percent recyclability is composite packaging. This is being met with deficits in the recycling infrastructure, with a large portion of

recovery capacities for beverage carton packaging and other composite packaging falling to the wayside on the back of high energy prices. However, this does not mean that producers escape their producer responsibility or that dual systems are released from meeting their statutory obligations. If necessary, the remaining plants will have to be paid appropriately or new recycling capacities will have to be created. This is where urgent action is needed.

There has also been good progress in recycling technology for beverage carton packaging that now makes it possible for not only the paper fibre, but also the plastic and aluminium layers of beverage cartons to be transferred for recycling. These new technologies bring recyclability to over 90 percent. What remains now is to increase capacities and then actually use them.

Recycling-friendly design – solutions available for most packaging

High-quality recycling is contingent on recycling-friendly packaging. In agreement with the UBA, the ZSVR annually updates and publishes a minimum standard for determining the recyclability of packaging that typically accumulates as waste with private final consumers. The standard reflects packaging trends and new plant technologies. ZSVR Chair Gunda Rachut is pleased with the progress: *'We have already reached major milestones on the way to high-quality recycling. Circularity-ready solutions are out there for the majority of packaging on the market. In some segments, stakeholders have clearly dedicated themselves to developing plant technologies and capacities. To conserve resources, efficient circular economies are indispensable.'*

Fully recyclable or not at all – gaps despite clear mandates

There is still packaging on the market that cannot be recycled because of its material or design. Gunda Rachut, Chair of the ZSVR, commented: *'What stands out is the big gap between high-quality recycling-friendly packaging and other packaging that is either almost or completely impossible to recycle. Since 2018 it has been crystal clear what packaging solutions are unfit for high-quality recycling. There are plenty of alternatives. Why they're not being used is unclear.'* Packaging that is collected by the systems, but for which no target has been set, such as packaging made of bamboo, wood, jute, ceramics or cork, is not recycled in practice, making it especially problematic.

Contacts

Dr Bettina Sunderdiek
Zentrale Stelle Verpackungsregister
Head of Communications and Press
Phone: +49 541 201971-13
presse@verpackungsregister.org
www.verpackungsregister.org

Martin Ittershagen
German Environment Agency
Press Secretary
Phone: +49 340 2103-2245
presse@uba.de
www.umweltbundesamt.de