

General Mills, Procter & Gamble Pressured to Trim Packaging

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The average American generates about five pounds of trash per day, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Now a San Francisco-based nonprofit is asking some of the manufacturers who produce it to accept more responsibility for recycling it.

Last week, the environmental group **As You Sow** filed shareholder proposals with two of the country's largest makers of consumer packaged goods, urging Procter & Gamble and General Mills to adopt "Extended Producer Responsibility." So-called EPR programs typically establish fees requiring corporations to help pay for the reclamation and recycling of their post-consumer waste.

"It means everything you buy at a grocery store, someone would be paying fees to recycle that," said Conrad MacKerion, senior director of the corporate social-responsibility program for **As You Sow**. "Right now, it's haphazard by municipality whether something is recycled and who does it and how efficient it is, so [EPR] would really change the infrastructure of waste in this country in a positive way. This resolution is a first step in that direction."

A form of Extended Producer Responsibility already exists for electronic waste in many states to properly dispose of the toxic materials embedded in many electronic devices, as well as recapture valuables, such as precious metals. [Updated 5-9-11, 12:20 p.m.: The original version of this post cited California's e-waste law as an example of Extended Producer Responsibility. It is not an EPR program because consumers, rather than producers, pay for e-waste recycling in California.]

The argument for end-of-life e-waste reclamation has resulted in the adoption of 23 EPR e-waste laws throughout the country, largely because there are precious metals to be reclaimed and hazardous waste to be kept out of landfills. Establishing EPR for commodities such as cardboard could be more difficult.

"We have received a shareholder resolution on the topic, but it has not been made public, nor have we taken any public position on the issue," said Tom Forsythe, vice president of corporate communications for General Mills in Minneapolis.

Although Forsythe had no comment on General Mills' position on Extended Producer Responsibility, General Mills cereal boxes are recyclable. They are also made from 100% recycled content, at least 35% of which is post-consumer.

Procter & Gamble did not return a phone call requesting comment on the shareholder resolution. A new "future-friendly" public service campaign, however, recommends buying nonperishable items in bulk to reduce unnecessary packaging.

-- Susan Carpenter

Photo: General Mills cereal boxes. Credit: Rick Bowmer / Associated Press