

# Pressing Starbucks to Follow Through on Recycling Commitments

By Conrad MacKerron, Senior Program Director, [As You Sow](#) | March 21st, 2011

How would you feel if a company publicly promised to reduce reliance on disposable paper cups but then didn't set up a way to track its progress? That's the curious situation we find ourselves in with Starbucks.

Here's the story: [As You Sow](#) filed a shareholder proposal with the premier coffee retailer last year because its approach to beverage container recycling is less than comprehensive.

As I [noted](#) in Triple Pundit last summer, the company has made some impressive commitments to reduce the environmental impact of the 3 billion single-use paper cups used to serve its beverages annually. It [promised](#) to offer in-store recycling of all post-consumer plastic and paper cups at 7,500 company-owned stores by 2015 and is commendably working with local governments and recyclers to develop recycling markets for those post-consumer cups. So far so good. **But here's where things get confusing:** Starbucks also committed to serve a quarter of its beverages in reusable cups by 2015 in an effort to reduce overall paper and plastic cup usage.



However, *they don't count how many customers actually choose to drink beverages from reusable cups.* Starbucks says it encourages customers to choose reusable glass and ceramic tumblerware when drinking beverages in its stores and they do keep track of customers who bring their own reusable mugs into stores and carry them out. But without counting how many customers choose to drink from reusable cups in their stores, how can Starbucks realistically meet its goals?

We also know that Starbucks subsidiary Seattle's Best brand coffee is served at 30,000 restaurant locations, such as Subway and Burger King in the US and Canada. That's three times the number of Starbucks stores, yet the company has made no commitment to recover any of its cups used at those locations. Due to these concerns, we decided to put our [proposal](#) again before Starbucks investors for a vote March 23.

[As You Sow](#) wants to help the company succeed in meeting its goals. But the history of recycling commitments by beverage companies suggests vigilance is necessary. Failure to keep track of in-store serverware usage appears to skirt a commitment Starbucks made in an Alliance for Environmental Innovation Joint Task Force [report](#) with Environmental Defense Fund more than 10 years ago to stock tumblerware in its stores. The report said that when fully implemented, this policy could save Starbucks more than \$1 million per year in packaging costs. The glasses and mugs were apparently put in most stores but not tracked or promoted – have you ever seen a sign on a cash register or been asked if you are eating in or taking out when you have placed an order?

More than 20 years ago, Coca-Cola and PepsiCo promised to use high levels of recycled content in their PET plastic bottles. Neither company was able to deliver. That failure motivated [As You Sow](#) to engage the beverage giants on recycling. After pressure on both companies by activists and investors early last decade, both companies agreed to use 10% recycled PET in all beverage bottles by 2005. (Pepsi's Naked Juice brand now uses 100% recycled PET and [just announced](#) they developed the first 100% PET plant-based bottle). Coke, Nestle Waters, and Pepsi also [agreed](#) to set bottle and can recovery goals.

Starbucks' commitment has notably expanded corporate responsibility for post-consumer recycling beyond glass, metal, and plastic bottles to paper and polypropylene beverage cups. For 2011, we've also filed a proposal asking McDonald's Corp., which also sells a lot of hot beverages, to set similar recovery goals.

The time is right to press for all consumer packaged goods companies to also take responsibility for post-consumer

packaging. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) shifts accountability for post-consumer collection and recycling from consumers and governments to producers. It's been successfully adopted for packaging waste in Canada and Europe, diverting large amounts of plastic, glass, metal, and paper away from landfills and into recycling streams that conserve resources.

We've become a "Throwaway Society" but can no longer afford such luxury as resource experts tell us we are overshooting Earth's ecological limits. Packaging waste is a good place to draw the line. It's a valuable resource, yet 43 million tons of plastic, glass, aluminum, and paper packaging—most of it with market value—is landfilled or burned in the U.S. each year. Product packaging represents nearly a third of the total U.S. municipal waste stream.

**As You Sow** is engaging consumer packaged companies including General Mills, Kraft Foods, Procter & Gamble, and Unilever to take responsibility for collection and recycling of their packaging. We are working for broader corporate acceptance of EPR systems in the U.S. that will lead to more efficient product design and recovery systems. Learn more about this from the [Story of Stuff](#) video, which has educated millions of consumers about the perils of overconsumption. We believe EPR provides a critical step towards developing sustainable production and consumption of goods.

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*Conrad MacKerron, Senior Program Director of Corporate Social Responsibility at **As You Sow**, uses shareholder advocacy to press publicly traded companies to become better corporate citizens. He has pursued successful dialogue on environmental initiatives at Apple, Best Buy, Coca-Cola, Dell, Hewlett-Packard, Home Depot, Nestlé Waters NA, and PepsiCo. The initiative he leads on beverage container recycling won the 2010 California Stewardship Bow and Arrow Award for Coalition Building.*