

A close-up photograph of a person wearing a bright orange high-visibility safety vest over a dark blue jacket. They are holding a yellow and black manual tape dispenser, applying clear packing tape to a cardboard box. The background is a solid dark blue.

The Truth About Packaging

We know you're busy. So, we've put together this Cheat Sheet which summarises the key details of our in-depth whitepaper, *The Truth About Packaging*.

Access to global markets and capital is increasingly dependent on sustainability performance. Regardless of your personal or business views on sustainability, a company's ability to operate will be impacted by Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance, either directly or indirectly.¹

Packaging remains at the forefront of environmental scrutiny, with many materials deemed to be adversely impacting the environment. There is a drive toward more sustainable options, such as recycled materials and plastic alternatives along with innovative design.

In 2020, we released our first edition of *The Truth About Packaging* to provide guidance on key terminology and product material options. Now, we are pleased to share an updated edition, which discusses New Zealand's infrastructure, common packaging materials and terminology.

REFERENCE

[1] Chapman Tripp (2024). *Protecting New Zealand's competitive advantage*. Retrieved from: [The Aotearoa Circle Report](#)

Commonly Used Terminology

BIODEGRADABLE

Biodegradable means the material is “eaten” by naturally occurring microorganisms such as bacteria, fungi and algae to produce water, carbon dioxide and biomass. The process of biodegradation is highly dependent on the environment.²

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

A circular economy is an alternative to the traditional linear economy, where resources are kept in use for as long as possible. The goal is to extract the maximum value from them while in use, then recover and regenerate products and materials at the end of each service life.³

COMPOSTABLE

Composting is the natural process of recycling organic matter, such as food scraps and leaves, into a valuable fertiliser that can enrich soil and plants.⁴

DEGRADABLE

Degradable materials will in a period of time, break down into smaller particles when exposed to heat, oxygen or visible or ultraviolet light.⁵

GREENWASHING

This is when a superficial or insincere display of concern for the environment is shown by an organisation. This is often a performative action to conceal or gloss over the environmental damage that is caused.⁶

The Waste Hierarchy

The waste hierarchy framework prioritises waste management practices, with waste reduction and consumption minimisation being the priority.



The Snell team have a depth of expertise guiding our customers through this complex and ever-evolving area.

Packaging Waste in New Zealand

Every year, New Zealanders generate 17.5 million tonnes of waste. From that, 12.6 million tonnes are destined to landfill, meaning we only recycle 28% of total waste generated by our country.⁷

Packaging is a significant contributor to waste, with around 352 thousand tonnes going to landfills each year. According to the Packaging Council of NZ, New Zealanders consume about 735 thousand tonnes of packaging annually recycling only about 58% of it.⁸



All About Plastic

Benefits of Plastic Packaging

Since the 1950s plastic has been a part of our everyday life. We see plastic products everywhere as they have become an essential part of how we live. However, recent years have seen a shift away from using plastic due to concerns about its environmental impact.

UK-based research shows that it takes 91% less energy to recycle one pound of plastic than it does paper.⁹

A plastic bag can carry 2,500 times its own weight and is resistant to changes in weather. Hot, cold, wet and dry temperatures won't damage plastic as much as it will paper or cardboard.⁹

Plastic packaging can support the safe distribution of food over long distances and can help to minimise food waste by keeping food fresh for longer. Plastic packaging can be beneficial at reducing food waste.¹⁰

Plastic products are often more re-useable than their paper alternatives.

Issues Around Plastic Use

When biodegradable plastics break down in landfill via anaerobic digestion, they release some methane and carbon dioxide, which are greenhouse gases.¹¹

Plastics numbered 3-7 are difficult to process in New Zealand due to the lack of significant local processing facilities.¹²

The New Zealand Government has standardised all curbside plastic recycling. As of February 2024, only plastics numbered 1, 2 and 5 will be accepted. These changes aim to reduce the likelihood of contamination in recycling waste from materials that cannot be recycled.¹³

Banned Plastic Products

In June 2021, the Government set out a plan to remove problematic and some single-use plastics from use. This included:

Hard-to-recycle food and drink packaging made from PVC and polystyrene and some degradable plastic products (e.g., oxo- and photo-degradable).¹²

Plastic Recycling in New Zealand

Your curbside bins are the most common form of plastic recycling. While businesses can arrange for their plastic recycling to be picked up commercially, items like pallet wrap and plastic film can be collected by Reclaim and Waste Management with bins and cages available for use.

REFERENCE

[2] Collins English Dictionary. (n.d.). *Biodegradable: Definition and meaning*. HarperCollins Publishers. Retrieved from: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/biodegradable> [3] Ministry for the Environment (2025). *Ōhanga āmiomio - Circular economy*. Retrieved from: <https://environment.govt.nz/what-government-is-doing/areas-of-work/waste/ohanga-amiomio-circular-economy/> [4] Hu, S (2020). *Composting 101*, Natural Resources Defense Council, 20 July. Retrieved from: <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/composting-101#whatis> [5] ScienceDirect. (n.d.). *Biodegradable Material*, Elsevier. Retrieved from: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/engineering/biodegradable-material#:~:text=biomass%20and%20water-.%E2%80%A2,specified%20time%20under%20specified%20conditions> [6] Collins Dictionary. (n.d.). *Greenwash: Definition and meaning*. HarperCollins Publishers. Retrieved from: <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/greenwash> [7] Chittock, N. (2022). *Government plans to shake-up New Zealand's 'inadequate' waste recycling*, RNZ, 13 March. Retrieved from: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/463243/government-plans-to-shake-up-new-zealand-s-inadequate-waste-recycling> [8] Reclaim. (n.d.). *Why Recycle?* Retrieved from: <https://www.reclaim.co.nz/why> [9] Bell, K & Cave, S. (2011). *Comparison of environmental impact of plastic, paper and cloth bags*, Research and Library Service Briefing Note, Paper 36/11, Northern Ireland Assembly, 23 February. Retrieved from: <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2011/environment/3611.pdf> [10] Verghese, K. (2019). *Why some plastic packaging is necessary to prevent food waste and protect the environment*, The Conversation, 5 June. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/why-some-plastic-packaging-is-necessary-to-prevent-food-waste-and-protect-the-environment-117479> [11] Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment. (2018). *Biodegradable and compostable plastics in the environment*. Retrieved from: <https://pce.parliament.nz/media/pepdtgt5/final-biodegradable-and-compostable-plastics-in-the-environment.pdf> [12] Ministry for the Environment. (2024). *Phasing out hard-to-recycle and single-use plastics*. 18 December. Retrieved from: <https://environment.govt.nz/what-government-is-doing/areas-of-work/waste/plastic-phase-out/> [13] 1News. (2023). *What can go in your recycling bin? Govt pledges to end confusion*. 29 March. Retrieved from: <https://www.1news.co.nz/2023/03/29/what-can-go-in-your-recycling-bin-govt-pledges-to-end-confusion/>

All About Board & Paper

Cardboard is commonly used as protective packaging for products. However, its use has increased significantly in the food industry.

Board is considerably more rigid than paper but cannot hold the same amount of weight as plastic due to its rigid nature.

The general thought is that paper is more environmentally friendly than plastic as it can be recycled. New Zealand has capacity to recycle only 50% of the total paper and board consumption, with the other 50% sent offshore for processing.¹⁴

Issues Around Board & Paper Packaging

Some items, like coffee cups, have plastic liners to make them watertight which means they are unrecyclable. Cups or takeaway food packaging labelled as compostable or biodegradable can't be recycled and must go to a commercial composting system. These are limited in New Zealand.¹⁵

Production of paper bags generates 70% more air pollutants and requires 50 times more water than plastic bags.⁹

Composting & Landfill

Compostable packaging is not accepted in council kerbside food waste collections or privately provided green waste collection bins.¹⁶ New Zealand currently lacks specific policies, regulations and systems required to process compostable products.¹⁷

Many people believe that plastic will eventually breakdown if it is left out in the weather for a long enough time. When rubbish is out of sight, it is often no longer considered a problem for the public. However, your plastics could end up in landfill, where a variety of materials are left to breakdown.¹⁸

Your Decision

As *The Truth About Packaging* demonstrates, there are an increasing number of choices regarding packaging product material options. Due to the rate of change in this area, we will seek to periodically update this document. For businesses ready to discuss the connection between packaging product material alternatives and meeting your Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) objectives.

To learn more, download our *The Truth About Packaging* [whitepaper via our website](#).

REFERENCE

- [14] The Rubbish Trip. (2020). *Fixing our fibre problem: Paper and cardboard does not belong in landfill*, 1 April. Retrieved from: <https://therubbishtrip.co.nz/be-a-tirading-kiwi/fixing-our-fibre-problem-paper-and-cardboard-does-not-belong-in-landfill/#:-:text=NZ%20only%20has%20capacity%20to,paper%20and%20cardboard%20recycling%20offshore> [15] Auckland Council. (2021). *4 recycling mistakes you might not know you're making*, OurAuckland, 13 December. Retrieved from: <https://ourauckland.aucklandcouncil.govt.nz/news/2021/12/recycling-mistakes-you-might-not-know-you-re-making/> [16] Creed, T. (2023). *Report: Compost Infrastructure in Aotearoa*, New Zealand, Ecoware, 20 September. Retrieved from: <https://www.ecoware.co.nz/blogs/news/report-compost-infrastructure-in-aotearoa-new-zealand> [17] Ministry for the Environment. (2022). *Compostable products: Ministry for the Environment position statement*, March. Retrieved from: <https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/compostables-packaging-position-statement.pdf> [18] Ministry for the Environment. (2021). *About biodegradable and compostable plastics*, 13 April. Retrieved from: <https://environment.govt.nz/guides/about-biodegradable-compostable-plastics/#:-:text=The%20majority%20of%20New%20Zealanders%20do%20not%20have,compostable%20plastics%20into%20soft%20plastic%20or%20kerbside%20recycling>

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