The Truth About Drinking Straws: Material Science, Misconceptions, and the Real Sustainability Challenge

By Eric Faber, Founder & CEO of Packaging Resources   July 2025

In the packaging world, few items have been as misrepresented—or as misunderstood—as the drinking straw. What began as a well-intentioned push to address plastic pollution quickly evolved into a global conversation dominated by symbolism rather than science.

At Packaging Resources, we advise brands and manufacturers to focus not just on *materials*, but on the full *systems* that give those materials environmental meaning. And when you look at straws through that lens, the truth becomes clearer: **the material is only half the story.**

1. Plastic Straws: A Perfectly Engineered Product in an Imperfect End-of-Life System

Traditional straws—often made from polypropylene (PP)—are lightweight, hygienic, low-energy to produce, and engineered for flawless user experience. Their carbon footprint per unit is *surprisingly low* compared to many alternatives.

But the problem isn't production. It's recovery.

- PP is technically recyclable, but straws are too small for MRF equipment.
- They fall through sorting screens or contaminate recycling streams.
- Straws frequently end up in landfills or as microplastics.

In other words: **plastic straws aren't inherently unsustainable; our infrastructure isn't designed to manage them.**

2. Paper Straws: The "Eco Hero" With Significant Upstream Costs

Paper straws exploded as the default "green" replacement, but LCAs paint a more complicated picture:

- Pulping and converting fiber into durable, coated straws often requires *more energy* than producing PP straws.
- Many paper straws contain wet-strength chemicals or PFAS, undermining compostability claims.
- Most are *not* accepted in commercial recycling systems.

- In practice, most go to the same landfill as plastic.

Paper straws can be part of a sustainability portfolio, but only when they're PFAS-free, responsibly sourced, and aligned with a viable composting pathway.

3. Bioplastics (PLA, PHA): Innovative, but Infrastructure-Dependent

PLA and emerging bioplastics perform well in LCAs, especially where industrial composting exists, but they come with challenges:

- PLA will *not* biodegrade in landfills, oceans, or cold environments.
- If they enter recycling streams, they contaminate PET.
- Composting claims only hold true in controlled, high-heat composting facilities.

Bioplastics have real potential, but without corresponding waste-management systems, they function as single-use plastics with better marketing.

4. Reusables: High Initial Impact, Lower Long-Term Footprint

Stainless steel, glass, silicone, and bamboo can outperform all single-use options—*if* reused enough times. Their environmental benefit hinges on:

- Durability
- Dishwashing resources
- Consumer behavior

For large operators, reusable programs require systems thinking, not just product procurement.

5. Wheat and Agricultural-Byproduct Straws: Low Impact and Underutilized

These straws, made from cleaned and trimmed stems, score extremely well environmentally:

- No manufacturing energy beyond cleaning and cutting
- Naturally compostable
- No PFAS, coatings, or synthetic binders

They're one of the few straw types where the sustainability case is both *simple* and *strong.*

6. The Real Sustainability Issue: Systems, Not Straws

Across all straw materials, one truth is consistent:

End-of-life determines sustainability more than raw materials do.

A compostable straw without composting, a recyclable straw without recovery equipment, or a paper straw with PFAS—these are system failures, not material failures.

Brands should focus on:

- Aligning materials with regional waste infrastructure
- Auditing true carbon and water footprints using LCAs
- Eliminating unnecessary single-use components
- Prioritizing transparency over marketing claims

When the right material meets the right waste system, the environmental narrative becomes real—not rhetorical.