Does Packaging *Really* Get Recycled?

A Clear-Eyed Look for Brand Leaders and Packaging Decision-Makers

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

For decades, brands have placed the familiar chasing-arrows symbol on their packaging, signaling to consumers that the material "can" be recycled. But in today's marketplace—where sustainability commitments, regulatory pressures, and consumer expectations are rapidly rising—the more important question is: **Does packaging actually *get* recycled?**

As a packaging consultant with more than 35 years in manufacturing, materials engineering, and global supply chain analysis, I can say with certainty: **the answer is complicated—but it's not hopeless.** The disconnect between *recyclable* and *recycled* packaging creates both risk and opportunity for brands. Understanding this gap is essential to designing effective, compliant, and realistic packaging strategies.

1. The Recycling Myth: "If It's Recyclable, It Will Be Recycled"

Many companies assume that if a package is technically recyclable, it will enter the circular economy. In reality, three major filters determine whether a material is truly recycled:

• Collection

Only about **55% of U.S. households have access to robust curbside recycling**, with wide variation by region. Rural, apartment, and mixed-use areas lag behind.

• Sorting and Infrastructure

Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs) vary dramatically in capability.

- Some can identify and separate PET thermoforms, HDPE containers, PP closures, and even PE films.
- Others accept only the basics: PET bottles, HDPE jugs, and corrugated.

If the local MRF can't sort it, the package goes to landfill—even if the material itself is perfectly recyclable.

- End-Markets

Recycling follows economics. Unless there is a buyer for the collected material at a viable price, it will not be reprocessed. Resin prices, contamination levels, and commodity markets drive real-world recycling rates.

2. What Actually Gets Recycled Today?

The packages with the highest real-world recycling rates in North America are:

✓ PET Bottles (#1)

Clear PET beverage bottles remain the most consistently recycled consumer package, with strong end-markets for rPET.

✓ HDPE Bottles and Jugs (#2)

Colored and natural HDPE containers for milk, detergents, and household chemicals have high capture and resale value.

✓ OCC (Corrugated Cardboard)

E-commerce growth has actually increased cardboard recycling rates.

3. What Rarely Gets Recycled—Despite the Symbol

These materials may carry a recycling code but are often discarded due to contamination, low value, sorting limitations, or lack of end-markets:

✗ Multi-layer flexible pouches

Laminations of PET/PE/metalized layers are nearly impossible to separate economically.

✗ Black plastics

Some MRF optical sorters cannot detect black or dark-colored plastics.

✗ Polystyrene (EPS foam and rigid PS)

Technically recyclable, practically landfilled.

✗ “Wishcycling” items

Straws, utensils, coffee pods, disposable cups, and compostable plastics end up as contamination rather than valuable feedstock.

4. How Regulations Are Changing the Landscape

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR), PCR content mandates, and labeling laws like California's SB 343 are reshaping recycling claims. These regulations increasingly require:

- **Truth-in-labeling**: Packages cannot display recycling symbols unless 60–75% of Californians *can actually recycle them*.
- **Minimum PCR content** in plastics.
- **Producer fees** tied to recyclability and environmental impact.

Brands that fail to prepare may face labeling violations, unexpected costs, and supply-chain chaos.

5. The Biggest Emerging Challenge: Consumer Trust

Consumers increasingly question whether recycling works. Greenwashing claims are being scrutinized, lawsuits are increasing, and brand perception is shifting.

The companies winning today are those that:

- Communicate transparently
- Implement credible sustainability programs
- Choose materials that avoid regulatory risk
- Redesign packaging for real-world circularity—not aspirational recycling

6. What Smart Brands Are Doing Now

To bridge the gap between recyclability and practical recycling, leading brands are:

• Switching to mono-material structures

Moving from multi-layer laminates to all-PE or all-PP films that align with current sorting capabilities.

• Designing for MRF compatibility

Colors, label adhesives, barrier layers, and container shapes all influence sortability.

• Integrating PCR strategically

Balancing performance, cost, and compliance.

- **Eliminating unnecessary components**

Shrink sleeves, mixed-material closures, and over-packaging reduce yield.

- **Partnering with recyclers**

Building forward contracts and securing PCR supply improves both cost and reliability.

7. What This Means for Your Packaging Strategy

The key question is no longer **"Is this recyclable?"**
It is: **"Will this package be collected, sorted, and reprocessed in the real world?"**

As a packaging consultancy with deep experience in materials, manufacturing, and sustainability strategy, Packaging Resources helps clients:

- Conduct recyclability and MRF compatibility audits
- Redesign packaging for EPR compliance
- Reduce materials and improve sustainability without sacrificing performance
- Integrate cost-effective PCR
- Prepare for regulatory and consumer-driven change

Conclusion: Recycling Isn't Broken—But It *Is* Evolving

Packaging doesn't automatically get recycled just because the symbol is there.
But with the right design, material selection, and supply-chain strategy, brands can build packaging that truly participates in the circular economy.

The companies that understand this nuance—and act accordingly—will lead the next decade of responsible packaging innovation.