Reusing packaging and containers: key to getting to Zero Plastic Pollution

BRIEFING NOTE April 2022



environmental defence

Single-use packaging and products are a key driver of plastic waste and pollution. Supporting systems for reuse is essential to achieving the government's goal of Zero Plastic Pollution by 2030.

Reuse is...

- as old as humanity itself. Using things once and throwing them away is a relatively recent trend, driven in large part by the plastics industry since the middle of the 20th century. According to the Zero Waste International Alliance, the idea of reuse is to "retain the value, usefulness and function"ⁱ of an item.
- Reuse can be organized at the individual level: Lunch boxes, water bottles and cloth napkins are all examples of packaging and products that people routinely use, wash and reuse at home and on the go. There are also a growing number of bulk stores and "refilleries" that sell food, personal care and cleaning products to customers who bring their own containers.



Photo: Mary Harrsch

 Reuse can also be organized on a large scale, through services that allow people to return packaging and products so that they can be cleaned and refilled or reused and sold again. Beer bottles, takeout containers and printer cartridges are examples of packaging and products that are reused on a commercial scale.

Why reuse?

Reduce waste

The Zero Waste hierarchy is intended to guide decision-making for governments, businesses and consumers to avoid creating waste. Reuse is the top strategy for packaging and products that we can't get rid of





altogether through redesign and reduction efforts. The single biggest source of waste in Canada, single-use plastic packaging, must be eliminated to achieve the goal of zero plastic waste by 2030. It should be supported particularly in communities lacking waste management facilities, including remote and Indigenous communities. **Requiring 30 per cent of packaging to be reusable by the end of the decade stands to cut plastic waste by more**

Protect natural resources and reduce pollution:

Single-use products and packaging are made from non-renewable resources such as fossil fuels, minerals and old-growth forests. Single-use plastics are a particular problem since they are mostly not recycled and therefore end up in landfills, incinerators or the environment after a single—often very shortlived—use. Producing and disposing of plastic leads to air, soil and water pollution that is harmful to the environment and human health.ⁱⁱⁱ

Fight climate change:

Each step in the lifecycle of a product or package generates greenhouse gas emissions and other pollution: extracting resources, manufacturing, distribution, collection at end of life and burying, burning or even recycling. Plastics are a growing contributor to climate change. Eliminating waste and single-use products and packaging are an essential step in limiting global warming.^{iv} Scaling

Reused vs. single-use cups at stadium events

A study in the US* found that:

- ✓ You only need to reuse a durable polypropylene (PP, plastic) cup 5 times and a stainless steel cup 6 times for better environmental outcomes than using flimsy single-use PET cups.
- ✓ Reused 50 times, a PP cup produces only 9 per cent, and a stainless steel cup 12 per cent, of the CO2 emissions of 50 single-use PET cups that are recycled at end of life.
- ✓ This includes energy used for transportation and washing of the reused cups. The resulting water usage is also lower than for raw material extraction and manufacture of single-use cups.

*Wentz, J. "Reuse wins: a life cycle analysis of reusable and single-use cups," Upstream, 2021.

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up reuse is key to keeping these items in use for as long as possible, avoiding the need for extraction and transformation of raw materials and reducing climate-warming emissions.

Support low-carbon jobs:

Replacing single-use containers and packaging with reused ones represents an economic shift from capital-intensive resource extraction, commodity production and waste disposal to local services designed to keep containers and packaging in circulation. Reuse systems are described as **trading waste for jobs**,^v which are created in areas such as logistics, sanitation and delivery. A recent study about reuse in Canada estimates that **reused packaging provides five times the number of jobs of single-use packaging**.^{vi} Another estimate indicates that boosting reuse in the US foodservice industry, including replacing all dine-in single-use containers and cutlery with reused ones, would create 193,000 jobs.^{vii} That suggests **nearly 20,000 jobs could be created in Canada if the foodservice industry made the transition to reuse**.

How can Canada boost reuse?

Here are measures the federal government must take as part of the plan to eliminate plastic pollution by 2030.

1. Require refill:

Companies that sell packaged goods are among the biggest users of plastic and the source of the single biggest volume of plastic waste in Canada, and therefore are a significant driver of pollution generated across the full life cycle of plastic. These producers should be required to refill or reuse a certain proportion of their containers and packaging and to provide opportunities for customers to (re)fill their own containers.

Countries setting refill targets for containers and packaging ^{viii}		
	Refill/reuse type and target	Date
Chile	30% of beverage containers sold in supermarkets	2024
Austria	25% of beverage containers	2025
France	10% of all packaging	2027
Portugal	30% of all packaging	2030

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2. Invest in infrastructure for reuse services:

The promised \$100 million fund for "reuse and recycling innovation and infrastructure" is a golden opportunity for the federal government to help expand local reuse services and make them more accessible. Funding could target infrastructure such as reverse logistics, local depots and sanitation hubs – especially in remote Indigenous communities. This support would complement reuse regulations and provincial Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) programs that require companies to take responsibility for their products and packaging across the full life cycle since reuse is an excellent way for producers to meet EPR responsibilities. As recommended by the all-party parliamentary Environment Committee,^{ix} the government must bring reuse service providers together with institutional supporters – including municipalities - to identify infrastructure and economic gaps to scaling up reuse services across Canada. More than 75 local businesses and groups across Canada have called on the government to support and incentivize reuse as a key part of the plan to achieve zero plastic waste.

3. Develop standardized containers and packaging:



Standard beer bottles used by Ontario brewers are returned by consumers to the Beer Store for deposit refund and distributed back to brewers for cleaning and refill.

Reuse systems work at scale when containers and packaging have universal designs and materials that are proven to be effective, safe for food contact and carry a small environmental footprint. Standardization allows containers to be collected, sanitized and redistributed in a local pool, which provides economies of scale without the need for complex sorting. It also allows for easier adoption of reused containers and packaging by smaller

producers and simplifies communication with consumers. The federal government must support the development of reuse standards for packaging and materials.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Zero Waste International Alliance, Zero Waste hierarchy, available at <u>https://zwia.org/zwh/</u>

ⁱⁱ Estimate based plastic packaging produced for Canadian use in 2018 (Statistics Canada: https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/220323/dq220323f-eng.htm) adjusted for annual growth and impact of single-use plastic bans.

^{III} CIEL, "Plastic and health: the hidden costs of a plastic planet," 2019, available at <u>https://www.ciel.org/reports/plastic-health-the-hidden-costs-of-a-plastic-planet-february-2019/</u>

^{iv} GAIA, "IPCC's mitigation report: five takeaways for zero waste cities," 2022, available at <u>https://www.no-burn.org/ipcc-takeaways-zw/</u>

Valiente, Usman. "Barriers and opportunities for driving reuse in Canada," Reuse Refill Canada, 2022. Available at <u>https://static1.squarespace.com/static/60f6fa731be3360c5a67b2a6/t/62476a8654</u> <u>e1a603306e716f/1648847494149/rcc_driving-reuse-refill-canada-report.pdf</u>

^{vi} Scout Environmental, "State of Reuse Refill in Canada and recommendations," 2022.

^{vii} Gordon, M. "Reuse wins," Upstream, 2021, available at <u>https://upstreamsolutions.org/reuse-wins-report</u>

viii Greenpeace: <u>https://www.greenpeace.org/international/story/51843/plastics-reuse-and-refill-laws/</u>

^{ix} Environment Committee, "The Impacts of a ban on single-use plastic items on industry, human health and the environment in Canada," April 2022, available at <u>https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/ENVI/report-2/page-ToC</u>

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