ENVIRONMENT SEMINAR 2026 | SESSION REPORT

Recycling labels face an uncertain future

OPRL and harmonised recycling labelling

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Jude Allan: Managing Director, OPRL

Jude Allan is managing director of OPRL and chair of the Packaging Group at IOM3. She began her career as a packaging technologist at Mars and spent almost 20 years leading production and creative operations at packaging design agency Jones Knowles Ritchie. She advocates clear, consistent and evidence-led recycling communication.

KEY POINTS

- The proposed EU label system aims to match symbols on packs with sorting containers.
- Implementation details and timing remain subject to European decisions.
- The PPWR's relevant labelling obligations have implications for Northern Ireland.
- QR codes can add detail but should not replace instantly understandable on-pack instructions.

FULL SESSION REPORT

The development of harmonised recycling labels across Europe could create significant challenges for packaging businesses and consumers if the transition is not carefully managed, Jude Allan, managing director of OPRL, told delegates at the Environment Seminar.

A split-second consumer decision

Allan emphasised the importance of clear and consistent instructions. Consumers may spend little more than a second deciding which product to buy and even less time deciding how to dispose of the packaging afterwards. Recycling communication must therefore be immediately recognisable and understandable.

She explained that OPRL emerged from collaboration between retailers seeking a common approach rather than a proliferation of competing disposal symbols. Its voluntary system has evolved over approximately 17 years and is based on simple directions, including whether packaging can be recycled and any necessary action such as keeping a cap attached or returning a film to a collection point.

Producing that apparent simplicity, she noted, requires considerable technical evidence and repeated testing of wording with consumers.

Europe's proposed harmonised scheme

Allan examined proposals being developed under the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation. Work by the Joint Research Centre envisages material-based symbols on packaging corresponding with symbols on waste receptacles: a system she called the 'periodic table of packaging'.

Matching a package to a marked bin could create greater consistency across European countries. However, it would differ from OPRL's approach of providing specific instructions about recyclability and

disposal. Complex or multi-component packaging may require additional direction, such as separating elements before recycling.

Allan explained that an EU implementing measure had been delayed and, at the time of the Seminar, a second-quarter 2027 publication was being discussed. This was an indicative expectation, not a confirmed legal deadline; the final scheme and its transitional dates must be checked against adopted EU measures.

A UK alignment question

The emerging EU framework matters for British companies supplying EU markets, as well as for packaging placed on the Northern Ireland market under relevant Windsor Framework arrangements. Businesses may otherwise face different artwork requirements across destinations.

Allan explained that OPRL had previously anticipated UK mandatory labelling under EPR, but the timetable had changed. The UK's approach remained uncertain, although she expected policymakers to pay close attention to European developments. In the meantime, she encouraged businesses to continue using familiar OPRL instructions rather than assume they should immediately replace them with unadopted designs.

The importance of public confidence

Frequent changes and apparently inconsistent instructions can undermine consumers' belief that recycling works. Allan argued that the transition needed to protect trust as well as deliver technical compliance, supported by clear communication and coordination between producers, policymakers and waste operators.

She also considered digital information and QR codes. These could allow more detailed explanations and environmental information, but consumers standing over a bin were unlikely to scan a code before disposal. Clear on-pack directions would still be necessary.

Her three priorities for the future were clarity, instructions that enable correct action, and trustworthiness. For foodservice packaging manufacturers, the implication is to monitor emerging requirements while planning for artwork costs and the practical challenge of maintaining consistent, credible information.

SESSION PHOTOGRAPHY





PRESENTATION MATERIALS

Download a PDF of the presentation slides here

Source and publication note

This session report is intended to be an overview and is not a verbatim transcript.