

The critical role of recyclers in the EPR ecosystem

Now that Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) legal criteria are fully in place in South Africa, local producers are responsible for the entire life cycle of the products they market and sell.

However, as Patricia Schröder, spokesperson for the producer responsibility organisation (PRO) Circular Energy emphasises, producers are not the only ones who bear duty. "Recyclers and service providers have a significant role to play in the EPR system. They ought to become involved, take advantage of chances to broaden their services, and help producers comply," she says.

A recycler's role in EPR Implementation

"Among all the different stakeholders involved in EPR, recyclers are one of the final role players in the system," Schröder notes. "They have a lot of duties that are of great importance, as they are the end point where packaging and e-waste recycling and processing take place."

She says a first step would be for recycling organisations to approach producers and PROs with an efficient plan for recovering or recycling packaging and e-waste "In this plan, they should indicate and prove that their facility and recycling procedures follow established criteria or recommendations. This of course would include that no environmental harm is done when packaging waste and e-waste is stored, transported and treated. Furthermore, they should ensure that the recycling processes don't harm the environment or human health."

If done correctly, she says that service providers and recyclers have the power to make waste management initiatives so much more efficient. "They should, for instance, work with and uplift participating marginalised communities, like waste-pickers, in the waste management process."

In terms of paperwork, Schröder notes

that all records should be made available to the relevant governing bodies by recyclers. "E-waste collection, disassembly, recycling, and delivery to authorised recyclers should all be documented."

Why and how recyclers should assist in producer compliance

Schröder says it is important that recycling professionals be wary of harmful producer industry tactics like greenwashing.

She cites the environmental charity ClientEarth when defining greenwashing as "the process of making a corporation appear more climate friendly and environmentally sustainable than it actually is."

She says that service providers and recyclers – being experts in their respective fields – would be able to recognise when the producers they work with are taking part in greenwashing practices, whether it is deliberate or mere ignorance.

"Then, they ought to inform the producers of the issue and warn them that making false environmental claims has serious repercussions, such as impeding the growth of the green economy. It could also cause massive damage to their reputation."

Schröder reminds recyclers that they work within an ecosystem. "All the role players can and should assist each other to be more compliant, leading to greater success for all businesses involved."

How companies mislead consumers with false environmental claims

Companies and producers have in recent years come under increased pressure to run their operations in an environmentally responsible way – this is both from a legal and ethical standpoint.

"Whilst this is undoubtedly something to be lauded, it has sadly also given rise to a practice known as greenwashing," warns Schröder.

"Although greenwashing is deceptive, it is not necessarily prohibited because of legal loopholes," Schröder elaborates. "The fact that it persists despite being denounced by NGOs, the media, and increasingly, regulators is remarkable."