SUSTAINABLE PURCHASING QUICK GUIDE: PLASTIC PACKAGING

Ecology Center and Safer States' Sustainable Purchasing Quick Guides are a series of fact sheets highlighting sustainable purchasing options for high volume, high impact products. They are designed to help cities, counties, and states create safer communities through the purchase of more environmentally and socially conscious products.

Why Plastic Packaging?

The production and use of plastic products, particularly single use products, has exploded in recent years. Half of all plastics produced are for single-use products, and packaging is the largest end-use market accounting for 40% of total plastic usage. Recently, an international commission concluded that plastic production, use and disposal is responsible for significant harms to human health, the economy, and the environment, and that the use is not sustainable. These harms occur at every stage of the plastic life cycle, from extraction to disposal. Plastic production requires the use of toxic chemicals and is a significant source of toxic chemical releases and microplastic pollution. There is an urgent need to reduce these harms by reducing the use of plastic packaging products–like single-use plastic bags, packing peanuts, and styrofoam–and switching to more sustainable options–like reusable items, paper bags, packing paper, and plant-based materials.

Solutions: Municipalities Taking Action

An increasing number of states and municipalities are reducing plastic packaging by requiring reusable options, redesigning products and processes, and passing Extended Producer Responsibility laws to increase take back and recycling rates. To address concerns about packaging in municipal procurement, cities are integrating it into RFPs. Portland, OR issued an RFP for electrical supplies and asked vendors to describe the delivery packaging and its recycled content and recyclability. Seattle, WA and computer vendor Gateway partnered to develop a reusable cart for equipment delivery and storage that eliminates the need for packaging and saves storage space.

Benefits

Purchasing more sustainable packaging materials reduces the production and use of plastic products that emit harmful chemicals threatening health and the environment and can provide cost savings. Many sustainable alternatives are reusable, cutting down on repurchasing costs. In addition to being reusable, many of these products are recyclable, which reduces environmental plastic contamination and contributes to a circular economy.

Tools and Resources

- Ecology Center Directory of Sustainable Purchasing: Packaging; Directory of resources for safer and sustainable packaging
- RPN's Supply Chain Plastic Packaging Reduction Project; Resources for reducing plastic packaging in cities