Recycling or Reuse: An evidence-based decision

DO WE REALLY WANT A PLASTIC ECONOMY?
Used corrugated is a valuable resource
A packaging material that benefits the planet, society and the economy

Severe consequences for trade, e-commerce, retail, and ultimately, logistics, would occur if cardboard were replaced by reusable transport packaging. There is no valid justification for this shift.

Waste from corrugated packaging returns to the economy as a valuable resource. There is a well-established and effective market for secondary raw materials, driven by market forces and customers.

The fibres that make up cardboard can be recycled more than 25 times with no significant loss in quality, reducing the need for virgin fibres.

The corrugated sector employs over 100,000 people directly and over 270,000 people indirectly.

The industry generates about €50 billion in turnover across the continent, and much of that value is reinvested into local communities.

Cardboard protects around 75% of logistics goods in Europe.

Used corrugated cardboard packaging = an essential resource for new packaging

On average, new corrugated cardboard is made of 89% recycled content.
The corrugated cardboard industry has consistently reduced its environmental impact

Between 1997 and 2021, there has been:

- **39% reduction** in the use of fossil fuels at paper mills.
- **27% reduction** in water use*.
- **25% increase** in the use of recovered paper*.
- **53% decrease** in virgin fibre consumption*.

*per tonne of production

**Safe and hygienic**

**Up to 3 more days of freshness on the shelf.**

Scientific studies confirm that corrugated trays are the best option for ensuring that fresh produce keeps its shape, feel and taste.

*University of Bologna, 2016*

Corrugated cardboard is safe, hygienic and helps prevent loss and food waste, which has a far greater economic and environmental impact than the packaging that protects it.

On average, only **3% to 3.5%** of the climate impact is linked to the packaging process itself.

Source: [Guideline StopWaste](#)

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**The European corrugated sector has pledged to reach climate neutrality by 2050.**

[FEFCO Climate Neutrality Roadmap](#)

Regarding the decarbonisation of the electricity supply, a corrugated cardboard plant can produce between 10% and 40% of its current electricity needs with onsite renewables, depending on its location.
The corrugated cardboard industry has long supported sustainable forest management practices

- **90.6%** of forests owned or managed by the European pulp and paper industry are forest management certified.*
- **92%** of the fibres we use are sourced from the EU, which has responsible forest management practices.*
- **93%** of the water is returned clean to its source in nature.*

*Source: Sustainability Report by CEPI

**IN THE LAST 15 YEARS,**

European forest growth has amounted to the equivalent of twice the size of Belgium!

![Map of Belgium with forest growth comparison](image)

- **30,688 km²**
- **61,378 km²**

**Corrugated cardboard** utilises mainly recycled fibres and for a small part by-products from the wood industry and/or virgin fibres from responsibly managed forests (FSC and PEFC certifications), therefore minimising the environmental impact on resources.

On average, **3 trees** are planted for each tree that was felled to produce virgin fibres.
Reusable transport packaging increases logistics complexity

The decision between recycling and reuse must be evidence-based

For more information, read FEFCO’s peer reviewed comparative LCA for transport packaging. It clearly demonstrates that single-use systems outperform multiple use systems.

The supply chain demands

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Cardboard</th>
<th>Reusable</th>
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<td>Sometimes</td>
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Reuse targets should only be applied if proven to be beneficial to

- the society
- the economy
- the environment

Further data about the real number of reuses and the recycling rate for reusable is needed.

Reusable in transport logistics would have dramatic consequences for the environment.

To replace corrugated transport packaging, Europe would need an additional 12 million tons of plastic.

This constitutes 2x plastic that’s currently on the market.

Foldable plastic crates require 5x times more space.

They increase logistics complexity, which means more CO₂ emissions.

Crates require extra transport for empty packaging.

One study* found that just considering fresh produce in France, shifting to reusable would mean 10k extra truck trips per year.

Reusable packaging must be washed between each use, which could increase water consumption.

*Source: REVIPAC/CIF/FEFCO

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UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF REUSE

WATCH OUR VIDEO

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