Pet Sustainability Coalition advances sustainable packaging leadership

As pet owners demand greater sustainability from the brands they buy, PSC helps the pet industry to address the environmental and social impacts of the use of flexible plastic packaging.

The challenge
Most packaging for pet food and treats is made of multiple flexible layers of differing types of plastic. In the US, 300 million pounds (135 million kilos) of such packaging is thrown away each year. The environmental consequences of the production and disposal of packaging, which include air and water pollution, carbon emissions and plastics pollution, are often distributed with unequal or unjust impacts on people.

Too big for one company alone
The larger-scale impacts and leverage points related to packaging use in the pet industry are too big for any one company to manage alone. For example, a packaging supplier can make recyclable packaging that in turn is used by pet product brands. But what if there is no system or means to recycle that particular type of plastic in the communities where the product is sold? In that case, the ‘cycle’ in ‘recycle’ is never completed.

The Pet Sustainability Coalition (PSC) brings together companies throughout the pet industry supply chain and global market to address broader industry challenges related to sustainable packaging. In 2020, for example, PSC embarked on a project called Flex Forward to assess and test the opportunities for a circular economy of flexible packaging for pet food and treats.
Testing return-to-retail collections
The Flex Forward project began with testing ‘return-to-retail’ instore collection of used flexible plastic packaging for pet food and treats. Sponsored by pet product company Earth Animal and distributor Pet Food Experts, over 120 participating independent pet food retailers have collected 5,000 pounds (2,250 kilos) – approximately 20,000 used bags – from their customers.

This pilot project has been designed to determine the opportunities and challenges associated with collecting used packaging materials within the pet industry rather than relying on local governments or privatised recycling-recovery systems. The used plastic packaging materials collected during the pilot project will be processed and tested for use in ‘downcycled’ pet products (such as bowls or toys) to be donated to animal shelters.

Toward circularity
In addition to testing for use in downcycled products, PSC has engaged the expertise of NOVA Chemicals in the ‘Toward Circularity’ aspect of the project. The company will process and test the used packaging to determine the opportunity for increasing the circularity of recyclates used in flexible packaging for pet food and treats.

Ultimately, the results of the project are intended to inform and shape a pet industry-wide closed-loop plastics recycling programme whereby pet owners, retailers, brands and packaging suppliers can collaborate to reduce the environmental footprint of packaging.

Sustainable packaging event
To build collaboration in addressing packaging issues in the pet industry, PSC is hosting unpACked, the first sustainable packaging event specifically for the pet industry. This action-oriented online event will bring together sustainable packaging experts, suppliers, brands, manufacturers and retailers to address the rapidly changing marketplace around packaging and sustainability.

The virtual event will be held on 23 and 24 February 2021. For more information or to register, go to petsustainability.org/trade-show-events.

About PSC
As part of its goal to advance the sustainability of pet product packaging, the Pet Sustainability Coalition (PSC) provides tools, research and education to help individual companies address the impacts of their use of packaging. PSC also fosters greater industry collaboration. Its tools include the Sustainable Packaging Supplier Checklist and a report on the Examination of Multi Laminate Pouches. Resources also include case studies on life cycle assessments of packaging performed by the PSC Sustainability Team for member companies. These resources are available to download for free at petsustainability.org/packaging.

Caitlyn Bolton Dudas
Executive Director and Co-founder of the Pet Sustainability Coalition
cbolton@petsustainability.org
petsustainability.org