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FPA Responds to ABC News' "Trashed: The Secret Life of Plastic Recycling" Investigation

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it is about the current U.S. recycling system*

Annapolis, Maryland: June 6, 2023 – ABC News' recent "Trashed: The Secret Life of Plastic Recycling" investigation isn't about plastic bags or even plastic packaging, it is about the current U.S. recycling system. Put trackers in any recyclable item today and chances are they may end up in an incinerator or landfill. This should be the intended result, given that these trackers are actually contaminants to the recycling stream and would be filtered out for disposal through most recycling processes. It is also because we have over 20,000 different municipal recycling programs across the country that are based on the value of the materials being collected and recycled. This value changes with market conditions and when it does, some products destined for recycling are diverted to disposal instead. Also, until recently, much of that value was in exporting our recyclables overseas. Because of these foreign markets, governments running the recycling programs here in the U.S. did not invest in the infrastructure needed to manage our own recyclables. When China, the biggest importer of U.S. recyclables, stopped accepting them, the markets collapsed.

Plastic bags and films have never been accepted at traditional material recovery facilities through the curbside collection of recyclables because these facilities were never designed to handle this type of packaging and because there is little value in the post-consumer product. Thus, the store drop-off program was created for bags and films, and value was added to these post-consumer materials by combining them with the "back of the house" items from grocery stores, like pallet wrap and shipping materials. Is it a perfect system? Perhaps not, but it is the system we have, and just like our curbside systems, unless and until the needed investment is made in modernizing our recycling systems across the board, not all the items collected for recycling will ultimately get recycled.

We need to stop vilifying plastic bags and packaging and start investing in the operational, structural, and financial challenges facing recycling in the U.S. today. A thoughtful extended producer responsibility (EPR) approach, a policy in which commercial producers shoulder some of the financial and operational responsibility to process and recycle consumer packaging, will help. Advanced recycling technologies, which are currently used for industrial recycling and waste management, can be implemented for consumers through current and new material recovery facilities to process an expanded list of recyclables, including plastic bags, film, and multi-material flexible packaging. Realizing infrastructure investment and recycling modernization—with a shared responsibility with taxpayers, municipal governments, producers, and consumers—is shown to increase recycling rates and cost-efficiency while reducing environmental impact.

EPR includes fee collection, remittances, reports on packaging use, consumer education, and market development, among other responsibilities, and has several benefits for all involved. A fully developed system would include curbside collection options for flexible plastics, removing the need for consumers to bring piles of plastic bags and films to store drop-off locations. Educational programs would also increase consumer awareness of the opportunities for recycling and convenient collection. While the costs of this system would be incorporated into the prices of consumer goods, this much-needed investment would benefit both the public and businesses through resource efficiency and improved system management. Once fully operational, a well-run EPR system would provide expanded recycling options and ultimately more material for manufacturers to make packaging from post-consumer recycled content.

Four states have EPR laws on the books, and FPA stands ready to help implement them such that they provide programs that maintain or enhance the current environmental and performance attributes of flexible packaging; reduce environmental impacts and costs; maintain or enhance keeping material out of the environment (i.e., litter and marine debris); provide sustainable funding, including funding for R&D and investment in advanced recycling infrastructure and sustainable end markets; maximizes collection convenience and educates consumers with effective labeling; provides quality materials for end-markets and circularity; and creates an onramp for collection and recycling of all flexible packaging.

For more information on the Flexible Packaging Association, please visit www.flexpack.org or contact FPA at fpa@flexpack.org or 410-694-0800.

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About the Flexible Packaging Association (FPA)

The [Flexible Packaging Association](http://www.flexpack.org) is the voice of the U.S. manufacturers of flexible packaging and their suppliers. The association's mission is connecting, advancing, and leading the flexible packaging industry. Flexible packaging represents over \$39 billion in annual sales in the U.S. and is the second largest, and one of the fastest-growing segments of the packaging industry. Flexible packaging is produced from paper, plastic, film, aluminum foil, or any combination of those materials, and includes bags, pouches, labels, liners, wraps, rollstock, and other flexible products.