



# Labelling: Environmental Claims

Original article by Nerida Kelton of AIP on [Food Processing](#).

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- **Full disclosure:** Although MQA is a member of AIP, we are sharing this article because we believe in the [circular economy](#) concept

Gone are the days when brands could get away with simply writing 'recyclable', 'biodegradable' or 'compostable' on their packaging. Now, more than ever, consumers are demanding brands to be honest about their sustainability journey including the choice of wording and logos on-pack.

With the [2025 National Packaging Targets](#) significantly shifting the packaging design landscape in Australia, a critical element that is coming up short is truthful and accurate on-pack environmental claims. The use of statements like the [Do the right thing logo](#), the Recycle [Mobius loop logo](#) or the [Plastic Identification Codes](#) (PIC 1 to 7) often confuse the consumer. The 2025 targets offer the perfect opportunity for businesses to review all environmental on-pack symbols and wording.

Below: Do the right thing, Mobius loop, one of the Plastic Identification Codes



## Codes and Confusion

As many of you may be aware, the use of the Plastic Identification Code (PIC) — or the symbol of the chasing arrow with a number in the middle — identifies the type of plastic the packaging is made of. For example, PET is classified as 1, HDPE is 2, PVC is 3, LDPE is 4, Polypropylene is 5, Polystyrene is 6 and 7 is Other or mixed plastic types. This voluntary coding system adopted in 1990 assisted the collection, recovery and management of used plastics in Australia. However, to most consumers they think it means they can put the plastic pack into the recycling bin; even if it isn't a recyclable plastic.

As a packaging technologist, designer or marketer, could you honestly say that you know which bin each number should be placed in? Do you know for a fact whether it is capable of being recycled through facilities in this country, or that of your export market? Now imagine how confusing these symbols are to a consumer.

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## That 'Litterman' Guy

The 'Litterman' guy — the symbol of the man who throws the rubbish in the bin — has been around for years. Whilst he is familiar to consumers, ask yourself what does the logo really mean? Does it mean that the product is recyclable or simply that you should be responsible and make sure the product goes in a rubbish bin at the end-of-life?



The Do the Right Thing slogan and symbol was a part of a marketing campaign launched in the 70s that was intended as a Don't Litter campaign. According to Keep Australia Beautiful, when the Do The Right Thing campaign was launched, 80% of people recognised the catch phrase, and in 2015, only 38% said they knew the phrase. What does the symbol mean in the world of sustainable packaging and to consumers today? Are there more important and less confusing symbols that should be on-pack to ensure that packaging is placed in the right bin at end-of-life?

## Sustainable Claims

Another challenge is when brands decide to use words like **biodegradable** or **compostable** on-pack. Having packaging that is biodegradable or compostable may seem to be a good environmental initiative but stating this on-pack is often confusing to consumers. If there are no available consumer collection or composting facilities that will accept this type of packaging in the country of sale, then this type of wording can be misleading. The AIP has spoken to many people over the last couple of years who assume that saying "compostable" or "biodegradable" on packaging is enough.



The use of the term **biodegradable** also leads consumers to believe that, no matter where disposed, biodegradable packaging will disappear to nothing within a short period. This can lead the consumer to erroneously believe it is acceptable to litter biodegradable packaging, or that it will solve the ocean plastics issues.

Similarly, the use of plastics that may **compost** if placed in the right composting environment can be very misleading if consumers do not have access to facilities for the collection and composting of compostable packaging with organic waste. Incidentally, the packaging may compost, but they do not create compost (nutrient-rich soil).

Before selecting compostable packaging, a responsible brand should be identifying whether there are facilities available to their consumers to collect compostable packaging with their organic waste. If there are, then communicate this information on-pack so consumers understand the end-of-life process.

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There are currently two other options available for the use of compostable packaging. The first being to establish **closed loop facilities** for the collection of compostable materials and certified packaging. These closed loop systems are designed to facilitate the collection and recycling of nutrient-rich organic material, such as food scraps, along with the certified compostable packaging and return the nutrients into the soil rather than allowing them to rot away in landfill. The second option is to identify home-compostable certified packaging and encourage customers to dispose of packaging via their home composting. The concern with this, however, is that many customers will either contaminate the recycling system with this packaging or think they are doing the right thing and put it in the rubbish bin.

The ABA | [Australian Bioplastics Association](#) provides a voluntary system to companies or individuals wishing to have their compostable and biodegradable plastics packaging certified. There are two certifications available:

- **AS 4736-2006 Compostable and Biodegradable Plastics:** Biodegradable plastics suitable for composting and other microbial treatment
- **AS 5810-2010 Home Composting:** Biodegradable plastics suitable for home composting



### Symbols and Logos

There are many variants of a recyclable logo or symbol and when consumers see these types of symbols on pack, they presume that the packaging is going to be recycled if placed in the correct bin. The question that needs to be asked is: **can this packaging truly be recycled in the country we sell the product in?** The answer needs to determine the logos you use on-pack moving forward. Brands need to be redesigning their on-pack communication with honesty and clarity.

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## So, where to from here?

In April 2018, APCO | [Australian Packaging Covenant Organisation](#) launched a nationwide labelling scheme to help consumers recycle products effectively and assist brand owners to design packaging that is recyclable at end-of-life. In conjunction with partners [Planet Ark](#) and [PREP Design](#), this scheme aims to increase recycling and recovery rates and contribute to cleaner recycling streams.

The APCO Packaging [Recycling Label Program](#) is a nationwide labelling program that provides designers and brand owners with the tools to inform responsible packaging design and helps consumers to understand how to correctly dispose of packaging. The two elements of the program are the PREP | [Packaging Recyclability Evaluation Portal](#) and the ARL | [Australasian Recycling Label](#).

## Packaging Recyclability Evaluation Portal (PREP)

PREP provides a way for brand owners, manufacturers and designers to assess whether an item of packaging could be classified as 'recyclable' through kerbside collection in Australian and New Zealand. PREP produces a report for each 'project' that is evaluated. A project will list the recyclability classification for each 'separable component' plus the user may nominate a scenario where the separable components are joined at the time of disposal (e.g., bottle and cap). Combining technical recyclability and collection coverage, PREP provides the evidence base for applying the Australasian Recycling Label on-pack.

## Standardised Labelling

The Australasia Recycling Label (ARL) is an evidence-based, standardised labelling system that provides clear and consistent on-pack recycling information to inform consumers of the correct disposal method. The ARL is designed to be used in conjunction with PREP, which informs the user of the correct on-pack ARL artwork for each 'separable component' of packaging. It is a simple and effective method for improving consumer recycling behaviours.

## Training

The AIP | [Australian Institute of Packaging](#) has also developed a range of training courses to assist organisations with their sustainable packaging journey. The development of the 2025 National Packaging Targets provides businesses an opportunity to stop and review on-pack information to ensure they are communicating effectively and honestly to consumers about your sustainable packaging.

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