



## On-Pack Recycling Label, facilitated by Worldwide Fund for Nature South Africa (WWF South Africa)

**Sector:** Retail

**Region:** South Africa

**Best Practice:** The On-Pack Recycling Label (OPRL) provides clear instructions to help consumers understand if the product packaging can be recycled based on the availability of recycling infrastructure in the local area.

Woolworths was the first retailer in South Africa (SA) to launch the on-pack recycling label (OPRL) in 2013 in its stores on all of its own-brand products to inform consumers about what can be recycled in practice in South Africa.

In 2019, WWF South Africa worked closely with six leading retailers (including Woolworths) using the Woolworths OPRL design to initiate a collective and commonly accepted approach to OPRLs. This case study focuses on WWF South Africa's development of this label (see example in Figure 1).

The OPRL was integrated in early 2020 into the SA Plastics Pact: a collaborative initiative to reduce plastic waste and pollution in South Africa, which is part of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's global Plastics Pact network. In 2020, the SA Plastics Pact began working on creating an updated visual guide for OPRL designs which will be brand-neutral for all brand owners to apply. This SA Plastics Pact working group includes the industry bodies for all packaging materials, and a broad stakeholder group from packaging manufacturers, to brand owners, retailers and recyclers.



Figure 1: Example of OPRL labels on a Woolworths product

### Principle 1: Reliability



WWF South Africa facilitated the process of bringing together a number of retailers to secure agreement on the technical recycling specifications for on-pack labels. The move to a single OPRL approach was championed by the Sustainable Retailer Forum and feedback from consumer research and the recycling industry was used to create the new labels.

#### Build your claims on a reliable basis

- Accurate and scientifically true
- Robust and consistent
- Substantiated data and assumptions

To achieve the "Recycle" label, the packaging material has to be recycled on a large scale in at least one major city. This information is now reviewed regularly by the SA Plastics Pact working group and the labels will be changed if necessary.

### Principle 2: Relevance



The label breaks down disposal information for each material of the packaging so that consumers know how to handle each packaging element. This addresses a significant aspect of environmental sustainability through improving household waste separation for recycling.

#### Talk about major improvements, in areas that matter

- Significant aspects ('hotspots') covered
- Not masking poor product performance, no burden shifting
- Genuine benefit which goes beyond legal compliance

The label clearly highlights an action that is critical to allowing recycling to be improved. In order to do so, it provides specific instructions in areas that matter (i.e., empty and replace cap).

## Principle 3: Clarity



The design and colour variants are based on the existing designs already supplied by Woolworths in 2013. The simplified OPRL labels moved into a binary labelling system: 'Recycle' or 'Not Recycled' departing from Woolworths' previous design which included 'Widely recycled' and 'Not recycled currently'. This helps to reduce the burden on consumers to seek extra information and highlights what gets sorted and which packaging would likely end up in a landfill.

### Make the information useful for the consumer

- Exclusive and direct link between claim and product
- Explicit and easy to understand
- Limits of claim clearly stated

The label design is made up of the packaging component definition, for example, carton/cap and the three chasing arrows with or without a strike through representing recycle/not recycled respectively and the material of the packaging component, for instance, paper/plastic. This makes it easier for consumers to understand the different information and act accordingly.

## Principle 4: Transparency



WWF South Africa's OPRL guidelines (technical report) and a Consumer Communication guideline have been sent to all relevant stakeholders placing packaging on the market. The WWF South Africa website also issued a [press release](#) announcing the labels and its features.

### Satisfy the consumer's appetite for information, and do not hide

- Developer of the claim and provider of evidence published
- Traceability and generation of claim (methods, sources, etc.) published
- Confidential information open to competent bodies

The WWF South Africa [Plastics: Facts and Futures](#) report provides an overview of the plastic pollution challenge in South Africa and puts forward recommendations of the necessary interventions to address it, including the use of the OPRLs.

## Principle 5: Accessibility



WWF South Africa facilitated the new design process so that the OPRL would be adopted more broadly by other retailers and brand owners in South Africa; the six major retailers are the most advanced and there are additional organisations engaged in the OPRL working group. The label is clearly visible and made available on products at the required time and location (i.e., on-pack).

### Let the information get to the consumer, not the other way around

- Clearly visible: claim easily found
- Readily accessible: claim close to the product, and at required time and location

Resin Identification Codes (RIC) stamped in plastic items, are intended to help waste pickers, recyclers and sorters' categorise material by polymer type for recycling. Sometimes these RICs can be misunderstood by consumers as recycling indications. To avoid such consumer confusion, WWF South Africa's On-Pack Recycling Guidelines recommend that the RIC should be positioned at a distance from the OPRL.

## Key learnings

- Partnerships are crucial for a unified and improved labelling system: WWF's partnership with Woolworths' established label and engagement with other retailers illustrate how the labelling system can be improved and more widely implemented in South Africa.
- This label shows how retailers can act as pioneers by replacing existing confusing symbols with standardised icons on their own products to drive the recovery of recyclable material, through their consumers.
- The RIC symbol was updated in 2013 to an equilateral triangle which further reduces the risk of consumer confusion. It is recommended that the RIC with chasing arrows be phased out and replaced with the equilateral triangle.

