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Please do not adopt the rules you are considering. Instead, please follow the lead of Vermont as detailed in today's Op-Ed in Seattle Times.

<https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/this-industry-sounds-green-but-it-could-undermine-wa-climate->

This industry sounds green, but it could undermine WA climate progress

Recycling and composting are critical to cutting planet-warming emissions, securing healthier soil and water, and boosting local economies. We are proud that Washington is a national leader in both. Unfortunately, a rule-making process now underway at the Washington State Department of Ecology could significantly weaken the state's food-waste management system and threaten its ambitious climate goals.

The issue is depackaging. It's something most people have never heard of, but ignoring it can pose serious environmental risks.

Department of Ecology draft rules released in June do not require that depackagers meet a minimum recycling rate nor that easily separable packaging be pulled apart before it reaches a depackager. Washington needs to do better.

Industrial depackaging machines are designed to separate food waste from packaging. For example, a machine opens a pack of rotten strawberries and neatly separates the plastic clamshell from the fruit. The fruit then goes to composting and the packaging to recycling.

It sounds like a tidy solution, but that's not what these depackaging systems actually do, especially if left unregulated.

Rather than gently remove food from packaging, these machines squeeze them together and pump a food slurry out of one tube and the shredded mess of packaging material coated in food residue out of another. The packaging is no longer recyclable and too often ends up landfilled.

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Worse, the food waste absorbs microplastics and PFAS, also known as "forever chemicals." It makes its way to a processing facility and then to the soil — potentially increasing the amount of microplastics and PFAS entering the food system.

Had food and packaging been cleanly separated from the start, the packaging could have been recycled, and the organics could have been composted. Instead, everything becomes contaminated waste.

The problem with depackaging is that it overcomplicates a fairly simple waste-separation process that already works. Organic waste separated at the source remains the best way to ensure clean, compost feedstocks and to prevent cross-contamination.

The good news is that Washington has a model to look to. After grappling with the same challenges, Vermont's Department of Environmental Conservation is preparing to adopt final [regulations](#) with guardrails that prioritize source separation, keeping food and packaging apart wherever it's practical. Under this approach, stale cereal is dumped from its box, and moldy oranges are removed from their plastic clamshell at the store. The food then goes to composting or biogas, and the packaging goes to recycling.

This is already standard practice at many grocery stores and restaurants. Source separation is quick and easy for the staff, helps reduce contamination, and diverts organic waste and recyclable materials from landfills.

Vermont's rules also allow for items that are genuinely hard to separate, like yogurt containers smeared with food residue, to go to depackaging. That's a sensible carve-out. Depackaging makes more sense at scale for items where manual separation isn't practical.

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How Washington proceeds matters for the climate. Landfilled food waste is a [major source of methane](#), which is a potent greenhouse gas and driver of climate change. The state has taken other significant steps forward, including [setting a goal to divert 75% of organic waste from landfills by 2030](#) and adopting the [2025 Recycling Reform Act](#), which aims to increase recycling of consumer packaging.

Now, Washington must build on that progress. Keep food waste clean and on a path to compost or biogas. Keep packaging on a path to recycling, not shredded into a contaminated slurry.

Hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians are already doing their part. When people throw their banana peels in the compost instead of the trash, they make a commitment to reducing food waste. Any changes to how Washington processes organic waste should honor that commitment and the climate goals that depend on it.

We are not calling for a ban on innovation. We are calling for commonsense guardrails. Washington's rules need clear definitions, contamination limits, and policies that prioritize waste prevention, food donation, and maximum diversion of recyclables and organics.

The Department of Ecology is accepting comments online until Aug. 13 at [st.news/organic](https://www.stnews.org/organic). Let officials know that they are not good enough.

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