

PACKAGING

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WHAT ARE THE KEY TAKEAWAYS?

- Sustainable packaging in 2026 will shift from single-use to circular systems built on reusable transport packaging, supported by accurate data that enables AI-driven forecasting, planning, and logistics
- Closed-loop operations, durable and automation-ready packaging design, and stronger measurement and transparency will become central to efficiency, compliance, and circularity
- New low-carbon materials – including seaweed-based polymers, AI-designed biopolymers, and compostable potato-waste packaging – will expand viable alternatives to plastic

What are the experts saying?

About the Reusable Packaging Association

Founded in 1999, the Reusable Packaging Association (RPA) is a non-profit trade organisation dedicated to accelerating the adoption and optimisation of reusable packaging systems across global supply chains through education and advocacy. RPA members are suppliers and users of reusable transport packaging products and services, bringing together industry stakeholders to collaborate on common business interests. RPA works to demonstrate the economic, environmental, and operational value of reuse systems for the distribution of goods. The association serves as a central forum for addressing industry issues and educating the market on the transition toward smarter, resilient, and sustainable supply chains.



Tim Debus,
CEO and President,
Reusable Packaging Association

What themes will be important in sustainable packaging innovation in 2026?

Sustainable packaging innovation in 2026 will be shaped by a shift from the one-time use of disposable products towards a circular systems approach that keeps products and materials in continuous use. Reusable transport packaging sits at the centre of this transition, where solid waste is prevented, resources are conserved, and new economic growth and value are created.

One of the most significant influences is the acceleration of opportunities enabled by data-capturing technologies, including the application of AI in supply chain analysis and decision-making, particularly with reusable products. AI is no longer theoretical; it is actively reshaping forecasting, supply planning, and logistics optimisation. However, AI's effectiveness depends on access to accurate, repeatable, and real-world data. Reusable transport packaging provides that data foundation. Technology-enabled products such as pallets, containers, and totes can transmit consistent unit-level information on identity, location, and condition. This makes reusable packaging a critical enabler of AI-driven insights, moving supply chains from reactive responses to predictive and, increasingly, autonomous decision-making.

Furthermore, innovation is expanding in business operations to include closed-loop system design. Companies are rethinking packaging as part of an integrated network of valued assets that drives efficiencies through pooling, reverse logistics, repair, and lifecycle management. These systems improve inventory reliability, reduce waste, and lower the total cost of ownership while strengthening circular economy outcomes.

Packaging design innovation will continue to evolve in response to market demands for performance in automated warehouse operating systems. With design for durability and precision specifications, reusable packaging can be optimised for robotic handling, longer service life, and repairability, becoming essential components as distribution facilities modernise.

Another key theme influencing 2026 is measurement and transparency. Regulatory pressure, ESG expectations, and customer requirements are driving demand for verifiable data on environmental impacts, food quality, and traceability, areas where reusable packaging systems provide inherent advantages over single-use alternatives.

Progress will be supported by industry collaboration and education. Advancing smart reusable packaging at scale requires holistic systems design, some standardisation and interoperability, and cross-company learning and buy-in. Organisations that foster collaboration across the value chain will play a defining role in shaping how innovation translates into measurable impact.