

Sustainability Awards 2026 rules and guidelines

Below are the general rules and guidelines for the Sustainability Awards. For more information, and to enter the submissions portal, please visit theSustainabilityAwards.com.

Basic criteria

1. The core principle for each category in the competition is to recognize packaging-related projects or innovations that, in the view of the jury, can have significant and positive environmental impacts. This can be understood either in relation to immediate performance metrics or in future potential.
2. Judges are asked to consider the holistic sustainability implications. Therefore, even where a competition category emphasizes one particular criterion, the winning submission should not score highly in this area at the expense of reduced performance according to other environmental metrics. Improved carbon footprint at the expense of reduced recyclability – and vice versa – are not sustainable outcomes.
3. The Sustainability Awards promotes rigorous assessment of substantive impacts. Therefore, submissions should be supported wherever possible and appropriate by empirical data, preferably with details of testing methodology.
4. Entries to the Sustainability Awards 2026 may be submitted to the following competition categories. Please note, new categories and eligibility criteria have been introduced for the 2026 edition of the competition.
 - 4.1. Categories open to submissions representing products already in commercial use:
 - Climate: packaging innovations that drive resource efficiency, e.g. through downgauging or reducing the carbon footprint of materials, or reducing the overall climate impact of packaged product itself, without causing other unintended environmental impacts.
 - Circular Plastics: innovation supporting the transition to a circular economy in polymers – technologies supporting recyclability, facilitating increased recycling rates or bringing more recycled plastic content back into new packaging.
 - Digital Transformation: eligible for solutions supporting sustainable transformation in packaging through digital innovation, AI or connected packaging.
 - Driving the Circular Economy: breakthroughs and innovations in recycling, sorting technologies, driving increase in recycling rates, or boosting use of recycled feedstocks in packaging.
 - Renewables: development or innovative use of bio-based materials (such as fibre-based or bioplastics) with significant positive impact or potential in packaging applications.
 - Reuse: innovative solutions and innovative applications of reusable or refillable packaging systems.
 - 4.2. Categories open to start-up companies, which have already achieved seed investment and been enrolled in an incubator program:
 - Start-up – New Materials: start-up technologies introducing innovative materials with positive environmental impacts in packaging applications.
 - Start-up – New Systems: sustainable packaging formats and systems developed by start-ups.

4.3. Category open to early stage research, without current commercial application:

- Research & Development: early-stage research & development in materials, processes and technologies with packaging sustainability applications.

4.4. Category open to broader initiatives – not for individual innovations or material substitution projects:

- Thinking Big: Initiatives, projects and collaborations that make an outstanding contribution to minimizing the environmental impact of packaging and its supply chain.

5. Please note, there are two additional awards that are separate from the main Sustainability Awards competition and to which we do not accept submissions through the competition portal. For the 'Readers' Award', nominations are made, and subsequently voted on, by Packaging Europe readers, with no involvement of the judging panel in selecting the winners. We also present an 'Outstanding Contribution' award to an individual in recognition to services to packaging sustainability. The recipient is chosen by a simple poll of the Sustainability Awards judges.

Submissions rules and eligibility

6. The innovations or achievements entered into the competition must have been launched or announced no earlier than 1st June 2024.
7. Entries must be submitted through the online competition portal thesustainabilityawards.awardsplatform.com.
8. All supporting information for submissions should be in English language.
9. Please refer to the descriptions of the individual categories for information about eligibility to enter a particular category.
10. Packaging Europe reserves the right to change the category to which a valid submission has been entered if it deems this appropriate. Packaging Europe is not obliged to inform participants in the Sustainability Awards if it amends the category of their entry.
11. Please carefully consider the eligibility of entries with regard to whether they are / are not already in commercial use. Packaging Europe reserves the right to change the category or disqualify an entry if it has been wrongly submitted.
12. The competition is open to entries from organizations and initiatives from the following organizations:
 - a. Manufacturers and innovators across the packaging technology and waste disposal value chain, including suppliers of raw materials, converters, contract manufacturers, machinery suppliers and recycling technologies
 - b. Brand owners
 - c. Retailers
 - d. Early stage R&D, including academic sector
 - e. Individual entrepreneurs and designers

- f. Multi-stakeholder consortiums and projects
- g. NGOs
- h. Local municipalities

13. The competition is open to the following types of entries:

- a. Generic packaging substrates, formats, technologies and raw materials
- b. Specific packaging products and solutions, including machinery
- c. Wider projects and initiatives aiming to boost sustainability in packaging and FMCG through best practice, collaboration, research, benchmarking, etc.

14. Collaborative projects can be submitted as a joint entry, e.g. packaging developed jointly by a brand owner and packaging specialist. Collaborators are encouraged to work together on their submissions and share the credit.

15. There is a maximum of six entries per submitting organization. Large organizations with multiple business units are encouraged to coordinate internally to decide which innovations or initiatives to nominate. Packaging Europe reserves the right to withdraw submissions from the competition if this limitation has been exceeded.

Where autonomous organizations within the same group or holding company can reasonably be considered to be effectively separate organizations, the 'six entries' rule may be waived.

Packaging Europe reserves the right to make final judgements on such questions.

Where an organization is named as a collaborator in a project that submitted by a third party (see point 13 above), such entries do not count toward the limit of six.

16. Participants cannot submit the same product or initiative in more than one category. Otherwise, Packaging Europe reserves the right to withdraw the submission from one or all categories.

17. If a product or innovation has been submitted to the Sustainability Awards in the past, it cannot be submitted a second time, unless it has undergone sufficient advancement to be considered effectively a new entity.

Judging

18. Judges are to base their decisions on their objective assessment of the merits of entries and are instructed that no preference should be given to past or present Packaging Europe contributors, advertisers or sponsors.

19. Judges must recuse themselves from judging any submission where there is a conflict of interest, in particular if they represent or have a commercial relationship with the organization that made the submission.

20. Individual judges' grading and comments during deliberation will remain confidential.

21. Judges access and grade the submissions through the same online portal to which entries are submitted. Judging will take place across two rounds. In the first round, sub-groups of the jury will each assess a random selection of submissions in order to select those with sufficient merit to be considered as finalists. In the second round, the entire judging panel will assess all finalists across all competition categories.

22. Judges may instruct Packaging Europe to request additional information or clarifications from the finalists following the first round of voting. On receipt, such information will be shared with judges.
23. Winners are selected based on the aggregated grades of judges. Therefore, the results cannot be attributed to the opinions of any individual judge.
24. An overall winner will be selected for the 'commercialized' track of the competition. This will be the entry representing an innovation or innovation project that has accrued the highest overall score among the finalists in the second round of voting. Wider sustainability strategies, entries from the start-up categories and the Research & Development category will not be considered for this award.

Sustainability Awards 2026 timeline

- Submissions open: 20th January 2026
- Submissions close: 10th March 2026 at 23:59 (US Pacific time)
- Finalists announced: 1st June 2026
- Winners announced at the Sustainable Packaging Summit, which takes place 10-12th November 2026 in Utrecht, Netherlands.