

Inhouse team develops SA's first recyclable 7kg potato bags for Shoprite Group

- **The Shoprite Group has become the first South African retailer to roll out a fully recyclable potato bag.**
- **It was developed in-house by an employee team as part of a leadership development programme.**
- **The new packaging will divert millions of bags from landfill and boost earnings for informal waste pickers – while saving millions on constructing specialised recycling plants.**

The Shoprite Group is the first South African retailer to launch a fully recyclable 7kg potato pocket – solving a complex packaging problem that has challenged the industry for years.

Used by millions of consumers annually, potato pockets consist of two layers – an outer layer and an inner wet-strength layer, which is moisture resistant and not recyclable through existing local facilities. This contributes significantly to landfill waste, with around 18 600 tons of potato pockets disposed of across South Africa in 2023.

The breakthrough came not from a supplier or consultancy, but from within. A team of five employees from various departments took on the challenge during a Shoprite leadership development programme presented in partnership with the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS).

Tasked with solving a real-world business problem through an Action Learning Project (ALP), they set out to make the Group's 7kg potato pockets recyclable, reusable or compostable.

What appeared to be a straightforward task quickly revealed deep supply chain complexity. Potato bags require an inner wet-strength layer to absorb any moisture – a specification set by industry body, [Potato SA](#) – which made them incompatible with standard recycling processes. A [CSIR study](#) had previously concluded that recycling these linings would require the construction of specialised plants, however this would come at a cost of around R30 million each.

Over six months, the team mapped the entire value chain, engaging with various paper mills, packaging manufacturers, recyclers, retailers, consumers and waste pickers. They investigated international alternatives, evaluated repurposing claims, and probed whether consumer return schemes or even reuse in the construction industry could be viable. None of these were feasible for the local market.

The breakthrough came when long-standing multinational paper supplier [Billerud](#), one of three major suppliers of potato pocket material for the local market, learnt of the challenge. Their research and development team in Sweden took on the task of developing a new semi-wet-strength formulation that is recyclable in South Africa.

Although Billerud's first formulation failed, a second attempt passed local recyclability tests, meaning it met all technical requirements, came at no additional cost, and could be adopted without disrupting operations.

The new recyclable bag also passed shelf-life testing and will roll out across more than 1 400 Shoprite, Checkers and Usave supermarkets from May 2025.

As a result, the proportion of the Shoprite Group's packaging that is recyclable, reusable or compostable will increase from 88.9% to 90% – firmly on track to meet its 2025 sustainable packaging targets.

Beyond environmental benefits, the change also creates economic opportunity. If adopted industry-wide, the new bag could unlock more than R22 million in potential income for South Africa's informal waste pickers.

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