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The State of Sustainable Procurement in 2026

Our Top 10 Predictions

2026 is shaping up to be a year defined by action and efficiency for sustainability.

The last couple of years have been dominated by measurement buildout: baseline setting, supplier surveys, dashboards, and the slow crawl from spreadsheets to platforms.

That work mattered, it created visibility. But it's no longer enough to secure leadership attention unless it shows a clear path to better outcomes and a financial return.

If 2025 was the move from "why" to "how," then 2026 will represent the move from "how" to "scale."

Procurement sits at the center because it's the only function with the commercial levers to influence what's bought, how it's specified, and which suppliers are leveraged.

Below are ten predictions that, taken together, describe where leading organizations are headed—and what it will take to keep up.

1) Carbon accounting is no longer the end goal

In 2026, leading companies stop treating carbon accounting as the end goal. Instead, Scope 3 data becomes the launchpad for redesigning and decarbonizing supply chains.

The big change in 2026 is that corporate carbon footprints (CCFs) become hygiene—a necessary but insufficient input—while product carbon footprints (PCFs) are increasingly requested in RFPs to enable like-for-like comparison across bids.

In parallel, early adopters start asking for service carbon footprints (SCFs) so services (IT, FM, logistics, marketing, legal, BPO) can be compared and optimized with the same discipline as goods.

This matters because product/service-level footprints force a more practical conversation: what's driving the footprint of this specific offer, and what will you change—by when—to reduce it?

Expect leading buyers to combine PCFs/SCFs with "show me the plan" requirements: process changes, renewable energy coverage, materials shifts, circularity options, or verified low-carbon inputs.

The winners won't be the suppliers with the prettiest ESG decks—they'll be the ones who can provide credible footprints, explain variance, and demonstrate measurable reductions at the offer level.

2) Decarbonization pathways become practical and decision-grade

AI turns fragmented emissions data into clear, category, and supplier-level decarbonization pathways, showing which levers to pull first, their abatement potential, and what they mean for cost, margin, and resilience.

In 2026, the practical breakthrough is not "perfect data." It's decision-grade pathways: AI combining internal spend, specifications, logistics data, supplier disclosures, and industry emission factors to build a ranked set of interventions—material substitution, design change, energy switch, logistics redesign, packaging reductions, reuse/remanufacture, or supplier transition support.

The organizations that pull ahead will use AI to industrialize a cadence: refresh category heatmaps, look deeper into the supply/value chains for emissions (and inefficiencies and resilience risks), segment suppliers, and run "campaigns" with clear objectives.

AI becomes a co-pilot to category management—helping teams focus on the few levers that actually move both emissions and enterprise value.

3) Scope 3 emissions are treated as a financial liability

Boards, auditors, and lenders increasingly treat unmanaged Scope 3 exposure as an unfunded liability, demanding credible reduction plans and product-level roadmaps, not just inventories and glossy reports.

This is partly driven by regulation and assurance, but just as much by commercial reality: carbon and climate risk increasingly show up as **cost volatility, supply disruption, and reputation/market access constraints.**

In practice, this pushes companies toward more explicit "finance-grade" mechanisms: carbon-informed total cost of ownership (TCO), internal carbon pricing, supplier transition plans, and sustainability-linked financing structures that reward credible progress.

4) Renewable energy procurement extends deep into the supply base

Pooled Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs) and buyer–supplier coalitions push renewable energy procurement deeper into supply chains, making clean power a default expectation for strategic suppliers.

In 2026, renewable electricity isn't just a Scope 2 story. It becomes one of the fastest and most scalable levers to reduce upstream emissions in manufacturing-heavy categories, especially when buyers reduce friction for suppliers through education, market guidance, and aggregated demand.

The winners will treat renewables as a supplier enablement program, not a "please do better" email. That means clear asks (targets and timelines), regional playbooks, practical procurement support, and commercial incentives where appropriate.

We'll also see more sophistication in how claims are made—moving beyond checkbox approaches toward higher-quality matching and stronger evidence trails—because buyers will increasingly be scrutinized on the defensibility of their Scope 3 reductions.

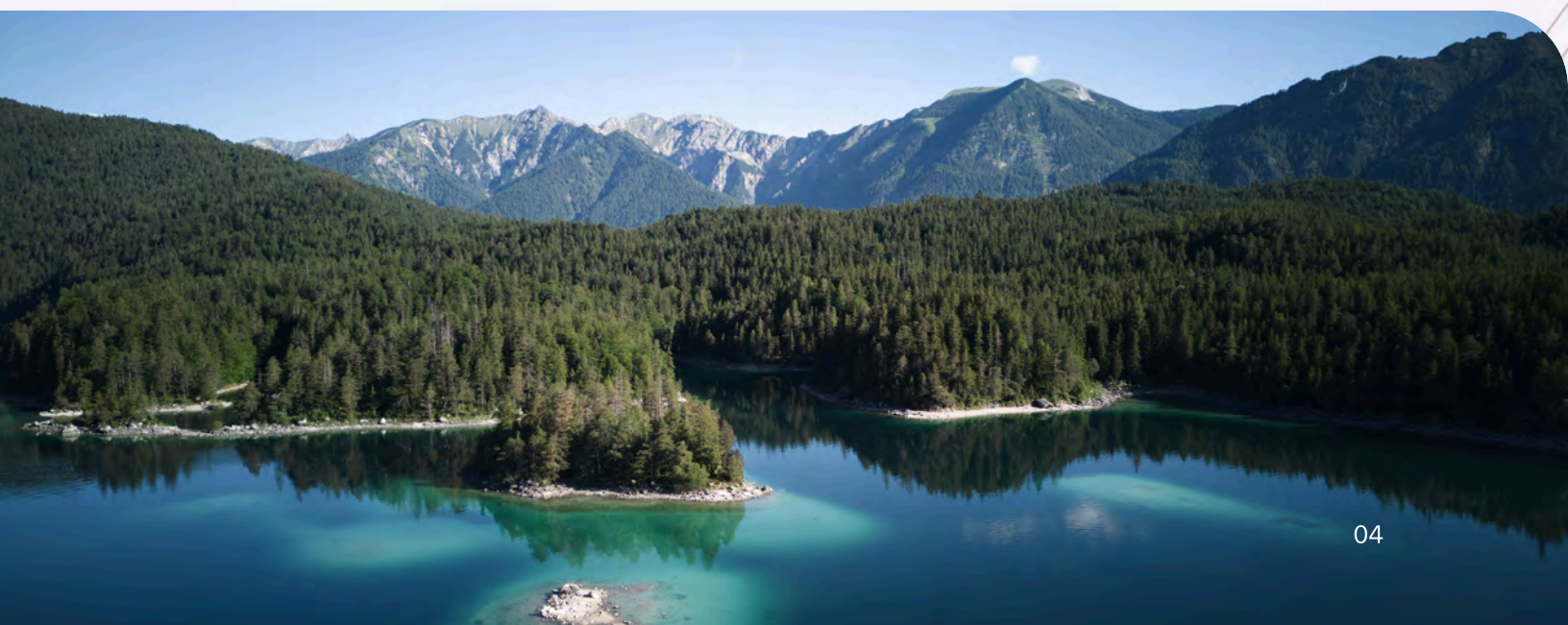
5) The low-carbon business case fully crystallizes

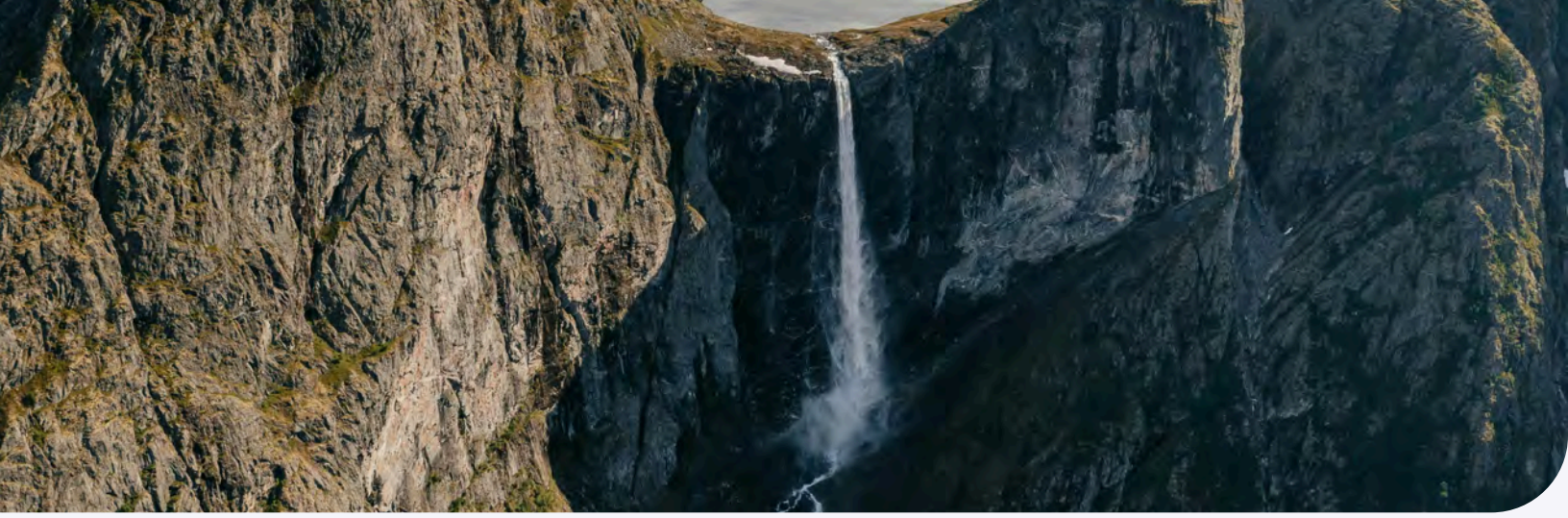
Low-carbon, resilient suppliers win more tenders, better terms, and cheaper capital, while high-carbon laggards pay a growing premium and start losing share of wallet in key categories.

The business case becomes clearer because multiple pressures converge climate risk, geopolitical disruption, energy volatility, and regulatory friction.

When you translate that into procurement language, the message is simple: resilience is value, and low-carbon is increasingly a proxy for resilience (better energy strategy, better process control, better data discipline).

By 2026, organizations that still treat sustainability as a "nice to have" will be outcompeted. Expect clearer segmentation: strategic suppliers with credible transition plans become partners (and get rewarded), while those who refuse transparency or improvement see tightening terms—more audits, more performance clauses, shorter renewals (2030 isn't far away), and a slow but steady reallocation of spend.





6) Regulation drives real supplier action, not just reporting

Regulations shift sustainability from “reporting projects” into commercial constraints. **The 2026 change is behavioral: companies move from talking about changing suppliers to actually executing supplier engagement and supplier change.**

Procurement teams embed climate-linked award criteria, require product/service-level data where material, and build structured engagement programs for high-impact suppliers.

The practical difference is this: “supplier engagement” stops being a survey cycle and becomes a managed transformation motion—segmentation, capability building, contract clauses, incentives, escalation paths, and ongoing monitoring with external solutions.

Organizations will also become far less tolerant of weak substantiation, because assurance expectations are rising.

7) Value-chain decarbonization becomes part of day-to-day procurement decisions

In 2026, leading firms stop treating decarbonization as a tier 1 supplier issue and start working end-to-end across value chains with customers, suppliers, and peers.

The most effective programs will recognize a basic truth: many emissions and costs are “locked in” by design choices, specifications, and customer requirements. So the most powerful lever is alignment: shared targets, shared methods, shared investment in solutions, and shared ownership (as Scope 3 was designed) that remove emissions from the system.

This is where we’ll see more “co-funded roadmaps” and demand pooling (for renewables, low-carbon materials, thermal energy solutions, and sustainable logistics options). Crucially, leaders will reduce supplier fatigue by mapping once and reusing standards. Collaboration will become a scalability requirement.

8) Front-runners reach what we call “Level 3” procurement maturity

By 2026, front-runners like Schneider Electric, AstraZeneca, and Haleon will push into what we call a “Level 3” maturity state: decarbonization is embedded into the procurement operating model, not bolted onto it.

At this level, you see repeatable mechanisms: carbon KPIs in sourcing events, category roadmaps linked to decarbonization pathways, supplier enablement (not just asks), and commercial incentives aligned to progress.

It’s where sustainability becomes part of “how we buy,” not “what we report.”

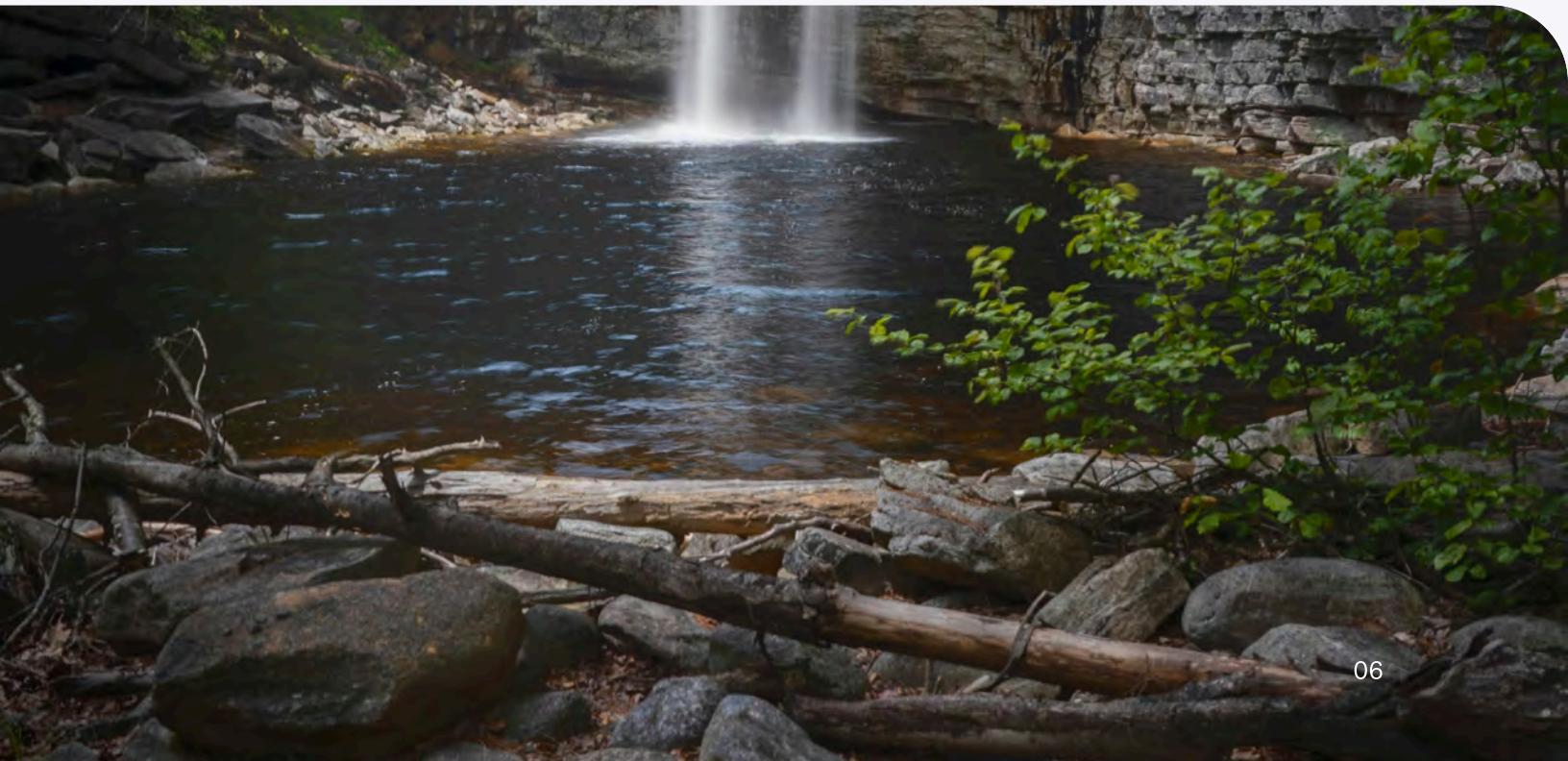
The distinguishing feature of Level 3 maturity is coherence. Data strategy, supplier segmentation, contracting, supplier relationship management (SRM), and value realization all connect. Teams know which categories matter most, which suppliers can move, what interventions are practical, and how success is measured in both emissions and enterprise value.

And culturally, leaders prioritize momentum over perfection—because speed and learning cycles matter more than waiting for perfect data.

9) Sustainable procurement teams gain real-time decision support

In 2026, the biggest shift is that AI stops being a novelty tool and becomes part of the operating spine: intake, analytics, contracting, supplier engagement, and reporting.

This doesn’t eliminate the human role—it upgrades it. AI takes the grind (classification, drafting, first-pass analysis, evidence compilation), freeing category managers and SRM teams to do what only humans can do well: build trust, negotiate trade-offs, orchestrate cross-functional decisions, and mobilize suppliers.



10) AI shifts from analysis to redesigning systems

In 2026, AI moves inside how companies make operational decisions: helping teams redesign logistics networks, product formulations, packaging systems, and sourcing mixes in ways that cut emissions and cost simultaneously.

This is where AI becomes truly strategic: multi-variable optimization across cost, carbon, risk, service levels, and constraints (regulatory, technical, supplier capacity). It's not "make me a slide." It's "show me the best set of options and the relevant trade-offs."

The competitive advantage comes from closing the loop: data → pathway → intervention → measurement → learning.

When AI is integrated with procurement workflows and planning systems, it can propose practical options: consolidate lanes, shift modes, redesign specs, qualify alternates, rebalance inventory vs transport emissions, or identify where circular options outperform linear ones.

The winners won't be the companies with the most AI tools—they'll be the ones who can operationalize AI into decisions at scale.

Conclusion

2026 is the year the Scope 3 operating model changes

If 2025 was the year sustainable procurement teams proved they could measure, 2026 is the year they must prove they can deliver.

That means moving beyond carbon accounting into decarbonizing supply chains; shifting to product and service-level footprints where it matters; using AI to create clear pathways and prioritize interventions; hard-wiring Scope 3 into commercial decision-making; scaling renewables and supplier enablement; and collaborating across value chains to remove emissions from the system rather than just documenting them.

The organizations that pull ahead will do three things consistently:

1. Hotspot focus on the few categories and suppliers that matter most.
2. Industrialize execution with playbooks, clauses, enablement, and clear requirements to the source of emissions.
3. Use AI to accelerate decisions, not just to accelerate reporting.

2026 will reward teams that move from insight to execution. If you're ready to turn Scope 3 data into real supplier action and enterprise value, now is the moment to build the operating model that can scale.

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A message from Sustainable Procurement Expert Mat Langley

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