

## **The Future of Plastics**

On 26 February 2018, the Committee of the Regions hosted a Municipal Waste Europe seminar on the future of plastics, opened by CoR Member and rapporteur for the waste review, Michel Lebrun. He underlined the important role that municipalities play in the effort to collect and recycle more plastics into a circular economy.

The seminar brought together leaders and experts from the entire value chain, in particular for plastic packaging. The aim was to open up active communication between the relevant groups of actors to identify and understand current barriers to more collection, sorting and recycling of plastics and also to explore solutions in a coordinated manner.

Key messages from Municipal Waste Europe members were harsh reminders of the problem to be resolved: plastics are everywhere, only 7 to 9% of plastic packaging collected today are recycled, our citizens think they are doing more by sorting their plastic packaging at source, additives hinder recycling, getting from waste to recyclates costs climate and money, only 6% of plastic demand in the EU is for recycle.

Looking forward, municipalities would like to see producers writing 'made from recycle' on their packaging and other plastic products as well as 'recyclable'. Each package should be made of one monomer or polymer for *true* separation in sorting plants; if they are multilayer the sorting mechanism only reads the one pointing towards it, leading to polluted bales which either have to be re-sorted at additional cost or treated as waste. Municipalities would also like to see incentives to go beyond the recycling targets: they can't tell their citizens to 'stop sorting now – we have reached the target'! Finally, we have to accept that today, some plastic products cannot be recycled so it would be better to recognise that and incinerate them with energy recovery.

Plastics Recyclers Europe told us that they are looking for more ecodesign to fit in with a circular future. Coupled with that, the better the collection system, the better the input into the sorting plants which then has a better output and less waste. In such cases, also today, recycled resin can hold the same market price as primary resin. Sorting technologies also need to be tailored to the waste stream then even plastic films can be sorted and recycled. Europe does have a challenge now that the 'back door' to China has been closed. We could turn it into an opportunity.

EUROPEN spoke of the secondary raw materials available today and the importance of their being 'fit for purpose' as well as fulfilling health and safety requirements. Producers are acutely aware of the need and pressure to design for recycling and have, or are taking action to this end. They are also working with recyclers who have invested in new recycling techniques such as depolymerisation (chemical recycling) which would enable the indefinite recycling of certain plastics. EUROPEN underlined the need for transparent and more cost-effective Extended Producer Responsibility at national level, with clear roles

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for all actors involved, which should improve collection and sorting processes. EUROPEN looks forward to the proper implementation of the new EPR rules in a regulated setting at national level. Producers acknowledge and pay for their responsibility but if this is not properly organised and executed by all actors involved, the whole system fails.

The discussion brought out the use of modulated fees by some EPR systems which charge more for packaging that causes problems in the sorting/recycling plants and less for easily recyclable packaging. It recognised that we are looking to solve two phases in one step which is tripping us up. We have the current situation with imperfect collection/EPR schemes impacting on sorting quality and quantities recycled thereafter which we will call Phase A, and we have the future aim which is ecodesign to make all plastic packaging recyclable, easing radically improved collection, sorting and recycling of high quality and quantity resulting in competitively priced resins (Phase B).

Phase A would acknowledge that not all plastic packaging is recyclable today and aim at separating recyclable from non-recyclable, the latter going to energy from waste.

Phase B would prepare for a market with plastics designed for recycling, effectively collected, sorted and recycled into new resins, fit for purpose and in line with targets in the UN SDGs and EU Plastics Strategy.

The market for this value chain is disrupted at the moment: in most cases the recyclers and the raw material supply chains are playing 'chicken and egg', i.e. 'I won't supply if you don't demand'. A key to resolving that is to fund the transition to provide both with security.

It is clear that one fundamental result of the seminar was to increase understanding of eachothers' difficulties and the realisation that to find the most appropriate solutions all actors need to work together.

To move forward in such a solution-oriented fashion, all present in the seminar agreed to hold further meetings between their respective members in order to coordinate their responses to the multiple challenges and to be able to benefit from the knowledge of both obstacles and opportunities and work constructively as one, interconnected value chain.

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