

SPRING 2019

TIME TO SHARPEN EU LEADERSHIP IN PLASTICS RECYCLING

EVENT REPORT



Cover image credits: [aryfahmed / Adobe Stock](#)

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.



Co-funded by the
Europe for Citizens Programme
of the European Union

INTRODUCTION

Excessive plastics pollution has become one of the common denominators of the climate breakdown. In 2017, the UN's world-first Oceans Conference warned that by 2050, there will be more plastics than fish in the sea.

"We could not have timed this conference better," moderator **Dharmendra Kanani** told the 14 May Friends of Europe seminar 'Sharpening EU Leadership in Plastics Recycling'. Four days earlier, at the UN conference, almost 200 countries committed to restricting shipments of hard-to-recycle plastic waste to poorer nations ill-equipped to process it.

On the eve of the conference, the BBC reported that an American explorer diving to the deepest part of the Pacific Ocean found a plastic bag, Kanani added.

The battle against plastics has gathered significant momentum, the Brussels meeting heard. "The pace seen in the last four years is quite impressive," European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness, **Jyrki Katainen**, observed.

The EU has reacted swiftly to address the 'plastics crisis'. Its 2015 Directive on Plastic Bags built upon the revised Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive by establishing plastic recycling targets of 50% by 2025 and 55% by 2030. The EU Plastics Strategy launched in January 2018 notably calls for all plastic packaging on the EU market to be recyclable by 2030.

Most recently, on 21 May 2019, the European Council adopted the Commission's Single-Use Plastic Directive. Billed as "the most ambitious legal instrument at global level addressing marine litter," it should signal the end for the top 10 ocean-littering items currently on the market, including plastic straws, cotton buds and disposable cutlery. The new law also sets goals to collect 90% of plastic bottles by 2029 and to incorporate 30% of recycled plastics in plastic bottles from 2030.

We also established the Circular Plastics Alliance (CPA) in December 2018: a group of waste collectors to recyclers "covering all links in the plastics value chain", Katainen said. Its 30 stakeholders are committed to producing 10mn tonnes of recycled plastic products by 2025.

Nationally, on 21 February 2019, came the French National Pact on Plastic Packaging and the Dutch Plastics Pact – bringing together government, companies and NGOs in the effort to curtail wasteful use of plastics. France calls on companies to recycle 60% of plastics by 2022 and incorporate an average of at least 30% recycled plastics into packaging by 2025. Likewise, the Netherlands is aiming to

"Industry is ready to supply more than 11mn tonnes of recycled plastics by 2025, but there is only demand for 6.4mn"

Jyrki Katainen

European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness

“Creating a European standard for packaging plastics will be a gamechanger”

Jyrki Katainen

European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness

recycle 70% plastics by 2025 and says each plastics-producing company should put at least 35% recycled plastics into all single-use plastic products and packaging by 2025.

Key challenges for the EU, governments and industry are improving recycling infrastructure and boosting the plastics economy, heard participants. Despite the will of companies, recycled products still fail to find their way into products, squandering a potential €70 to €105bn annually.

“Industry is ready to supply more than 11mn tonnes of recycled plastics by 2025, but there is only demand for 6.4mn”, Katainen said.

Experts agreed there is no ‘silver bullet’ solution to solve the plastics crisis and more specifically the lack of demand for recycled plastics. However, Katainen said “creating a European standard for packaging plastics will be a gamechanger”, which would provide a new market for packaging waste.

THE PLASTICS CHALLENGE

Replacing single-use plastics with innovative alternatives would give the EU a significant opportunity, as 95% of the value from plastics production is lost to the economy. But demand for recycled plastics is only 6%. The EU must develop a more robust recycling framework and produce more responsibly, speakers agreed.

Putting the onus on consumers is not the answer, explained **Petra Hongell**, Public Information Assistant at the UN Regional Information Center for Western Europe (UNRIC). “It’s all very well Delhaize putting out nice cotton bags for people to put their fruits in, but the plastic ones are just beside them. Policymakers need to move quicker”, she said. Hongel elaborated that since 2004, waste exports to non-EU countries have increased by 69%: “The EU should do better.”

The Commission’s Katainen agreed that the current “wild west”, in terms of quality, is not optimum in terms of recycling. But cost is a problem. Recycled plastic must be available at sufficient volumes and at a competitive price or companies will chose to use virgin plastics first, he said. “They must be as easy to trade as the primary materials.

“Recycling must be profitable”, Katainen continued, or we will not have a circular economy. The Vice-President expressed that “we want to be a superpower” in this domain. With the Circular Plastics Alliance, “companies are already in a good place to change business models”, he said, emphasising there exist very good initiatives throughout out all of the EU’s member states, not just in western Europe.

As it stands however, the EU produces a gargantuan 60mn tonnes of plastics every year. Global plastics production reached 322mn tonnes in 2015, according to Commission figures. This has major

environmental consequences. In Europe alone, 500,000 tonnes of plastic enter the oceans every year.

“We need to do more with less plastics and use them in a smarter, more efficient way... Consumers are angry with companies and supermarkets,” said **Wytske van der Mei**, Head of Unit for Resource Efficiency of the Directorate Sustainable Environment and Circular Economy of the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management.

Welcoming the Circular Plastics Alliance and Dutch and French Plastic Pacts, she said “by early 2020, there could be a real EU Plastic Pact, shoulder to shoulder with the new European Commission”.

When signing the Dutch Plastics Pact, companies agreed they need the network to solve their problems, speed up innovations and create a sound business case, she added. “They also need a government to connect the parties... and set a transparent framework to build on.”

Igor Chauvelot, Plastic Circular Economy Director at Danone, agreed it was essential to improve the current situation. “The packaging system for plastics does not work. We need 100% circular packaging and eliminate what we do not need.”

For Chauvelot, the challenge of increasing recycled content was more complex, as food safety standards were “super high”. The company is aiming to use 25% recycled PET drinks bottles by the end of 2020 and 50% by 2025. The company’s Evian water brand plans to use 100% recycled PET by 2025. “By codesigning and co-financing systems, we will achieve this.”

He added: “Consumers are starving for a recyclability claim” on products. Information on packaging must be simple, easy and straightforward.

More recyclable packaging will also mean less marine pollution. **André Abreu**, head of International Ocean Policy at Tara Oceans Foundation, said. The media highlights the harm marine litter causes to turtles, “Yes, turtles are very cute, but the real impact of plastic pollution is on micro-biodiversity and plankton, which provides services for the whole planet.”, Abreu Said.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dealing with plastic mountains and increasing the recycled plastics market will be difficult, but not insurmountable, van der Mei said. With the combined effort of frontrunning companies, the government and civil society, progress has already been made.

Some delegates were sceptical, however. European Bioplastics Managing Director **Hasso von Progrell** said as well as a proper

“By early 2020, there could be a real EU Plastic Pact, shoulder to shoulder with the new European Commission”

Wytske van der Mei
Head of Unit for Resource Efficiency at the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management



André Abreu, Head of International Ocean Policy at Tara Oceans Foundation



Igor Chauvelot, Plastic Circular Economy Director at Danone



Silke Conrad, Manager for Automotive Issues at Daimler



Jyrki Katainen, European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness





Igor Chauvelot, Plastic Circular Economy Director at Danone



Jyrki Katainen, European Commission Vice-President for Jobs, Growth, Investment and Competitiveness



Petra Hongell, Public Information Assistant at the UN Regional Information Center for Western Europe (UNRIC)



Wyske van der Mei, Head of Unit for Resource Efficiency at the Dutch Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management



“But the real impact of plastic pollution is on micro biodiversity and plankton, that provides services for the whole planet”

André Abreu

Head of International Ocean Policy
at Tara Oceans Foundation

recycling infrastructure, “we need more incentives to use recycled or bio-based plastics. Everyone talks about CO2 taxes, but why not a tax on fossil carbon – positive taxation to change behaviour?”

Silke Conrad, Manager for Automotive Issues at Daimler, said, “At some point we have to accept that some plastics can’t be recycled.” She called for sector specific plastic targets as, “not all plastics are recycled in the same way”.

Christian Crépet, Executive Director of Petcore Europe, urged delegates to address the state of play: “We need to look at what can and cannot be collected and recycled. The 35% recycled content goal is a good idea, but the infrastructure isn’t ready,” he continued, adding recycled PET was 50% more expensive than virgin plastic.

“Burning plastics is interesting for some industries, that’s an issue that has to be addressed as well,” Crépet added.

Katainen offered chemical recycling as a way out, challenging the conference: “Is there any sense in what we are doing, if chemical recycling can replace it all?”

In the ensuing debate, **Henk Pool**, Innovation Manager at the European Chemical Industry Council (CEFIC), said, “This is the right question, but the solution is more complex.” The answer depends on if “regenerating the polymer” is possible, he argued.

Christine Bunte, Senior Manager for Communications & Government Relations Europe, Industry Advocacy & Environment Policy at BASF, maintained that chemical recycling was part of the solution. For example, pyrolysis enables the removal of hazardous substances, she said.

However, **Piotr Barczak**, the European Environmental Bureau’s Senior Policy Officer for Waste, disagreed. “In the years to come, chemical recycling could become a second incineration, and this is not the answer,” he said.

“The emphasis should be on preventing disposable and short-life plastics and focusing on reusable plastics and long-life plastic for automotive systems. We are not against all plastics, but vehemently against chemical recycling as investments going into this should be put into reuse.”

CONCLUSION

Increasing plastics recycling and the use of recycled plastics in new products and stopping marine pollution is achievable – under the right conditions, speakers agreed.

“First we need collaboration and cross-fertilisation; second there must be innovation”, Chauvelot said. “We need to be smarter, faster and not just copy-paste what has worked in some countries.”

A multi-stakeholder approach was essential: “I am convinced that if civil society, research, industry and governments put targets together they can drive the change.”

All techniques to achieve these goals should be considered too – even more controversial methods like chemical recycling or deposit return schemes that are unpopular with the packaging industry. “There is no one-size fits all solution,” Chauvelot said.

A European recycling standard for plastics is key, Katainen said, with only technical problems to hold it back. “Once we find the way to create this standard, it will be politically possible.”

And rather than resorting to plastics scare stories so popular in the media, education is key, Abreu said. “We really see a need for more education and information without plastics bashing”, he argued, emphasising consumers should know plastics’ toxicity comes from chemical additives.

Generally, consumers need to understand what can be recycled, he made clear. “I don’t know if something is recyclable in France or not, and I’m supposed to be a specialist.”

Van der Mei noted the Netherlands’s new app telling consumers how to separate the waste. “The only problem is getting people to download it.”

But she remains positive that with “mutual goals and mutual standards”, the plastics crisis can be solved: “We did it before with the ozone layer and acid rain, so we can do it again.”

“We need to be smarter, faster and not just copy-paste what has worked in some countries”

Igor Chauvelot

Plastic Circular Economy Director at Danone



Friends of Europe

Connect. Debate. Change.

+32 2 893 98 10

info@friendsofeurope.org

friendsofeurope.org

Friends of Europe is a leading think-tank that connects people, stimulates debate and triggers change to create a more inclusive, sustainable and forward-looking Europe.