

No Time to Waste

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Event Coverage

If Europe is serious about tackling PET waste, it's time everyone found ways to help the recycling industry access the raw materials they need.



Photo Credit: Jean-Yves Limet

The PET recycling sector stands ready to deliver - if it can access the necessary raw materials.

This was the core message from a meeting in the European Parliament hosted by MEP Mark Demesmaeker.

The Belgian ECR group deputy explained that he was a passionate supporter of the shift to a circular economy, but said, "currently, the way in which we use plastic is neither economic nor sustainable."

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He said that China's decision to ban imports of waste plastic had delivered a wake-up call to the EU, forcing it to 'innovate from within', but added that the public needs to be part of the solution.

"Turning public concern into shared responsibility can turn plastic waste into fields of gold," he said.

Greek EPP MEP Maria Spyraiki pointed out that municipalities were vital stakeholders. Further developing the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme and sharing best practice was also important, as was investing in education for schoolchildren, consumers and local authorities.

"We urgently need a bottom-up approach to the problem - the planet cannot afford to wait", she urged.

"Turning public concern into shared responsibility can turn plastic waste into fields of gold" **Mark Demesmaeker MEP**

Grzegorz Radziejewski, an official from European Commission vice-president Jyrki Katainen's cabinet, said EU policy makers were happy to help.

"We know we won't find a silver bullet today, but we will continue to collaborate," he said, adding that the starting point should be establishing a well-functioning secondary market for the raw materials.

He said it was vital to minimise the fragmentation of processes to maximise economies of scale, but in so doing, subsidiarity had to be respected.

Although the Commission was working on guidelines and standards, he said that nationally, implementation may differ. The Commission was supporting municipalities; the URBIS platform was designed to help local authorities design projects when investing in new sorting technologies.

Małgorzata Gołębiewska from DG Environment set out the Commission's main plastics-based initiatives and targets. These included stricter rules on new targets for packaging waste recycling, separate collection obligations, and new requirements under extended producer responsibility schemes.

Christian Crépet, Executive Director of Petcore Europe, reminded the audience that recyclability was not the problem; it was access to materials; 99 percent of PET bottles were recyclable. The challenge, however, lay in encouraging collection and sorting.

Although some countries were making admirable progress, others - particularly in central and eastern Europe - were lagging behind.

“We know we won’t find a silver bullet today, but we will continue to collaborate”
Grzegorz Radziejewski member of Commission vice-president Jyrki Katainen’s cabinet

Industry has been ready to step up for a long time - the Petcore pledges for 2018 were testament to this.

Patrick Laevers, Managing Director of Fost Plus, which promotes, coordinates and finances selective collecting, sorting and recycling of household packaging waste in Belgium, spoke about their successes.

The current collection scheme for plastics had proved highly effective. It was now being expanded to encompass a wider range of PET plastics. Ultimately the ambition was to recycle virtually all household plastic waste.

Wolfgang Ringel, Senior Vice President of Tomra systems, a company providing equipment for recycling systems, discussed the potential of deposit schemes for PET bottles. Public support for these, he believed, was strong.

“A deposit (on a beverage container) is not a tax - you can get it back in full”.

He believed there was now sufficient value in PET recycling to provide a genuine market ‘pull’ for materials and cited the example of Lidl in Germany, where the supermarket had become it the first retailer worldwide to ‘close the loop’ from selling to collecting through to production to recycling of PET bottles in-house.

As well as collecting materials for recycling, shops now own their own bottle production and filling facilities.

“It is important to recognise the benefits of harmonisation, which should be encouraged wherever possible” Christian Crépet, **Executive Director of Petcore Europe**

Gian De Belder, Procter & Gamble’s principal scientist for sustainable packaging development, stressed the importance of design in making packaging collection - and ultimately sorting - easier.

Although PET was already the most-collected material in the world, there was room for improvement.

Harmonised guidelines and standardised sorting systems would help, but what really matters is that recycling happens.

Industry - through design innovation - was helping; smarter packaging, barcodes integrated into design to aid sorting will further improve processes.

A lively Q&A highlighted a number of important issues with Demesmaeker pointing out that showing lagging countries what was already achievable would give them the confidence to invest and leapfrog from their current situations.

Crépet, pointed out that while subsidiarity was vitally important, it was also important to recognise the benefits of harmonisation, which should be encouraged wherever possible.

Laevers felt that ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches were not needed. Keeping the recycling process simple

delivers high recycling rates.

A deposit scheme, prioritising one type of PET item - in this case bottles - could undermine an 'all plastic waste' approach.

Ringel said that while deposit schemes work well, there was no issue with different approaches - all would still require some kind of recycling technology.

In closing, Demesmaeker, said it was clear that to date, one part of the job had been achieved.

Although much remained to be done, the cooperation between stakeholders had been strong so far; he hoped it would continue in the same vein.

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