

Asking an Expert, the Bag Banners and UK Takes Notice

Michael Stephen, an international expert on bioplastics, shares his thoughts and opinion on important issues impacting the bioplastics industry. Today, Michael writes about asking an expert, the bag banners, Recycling and UK takes notice.



Michael Stephen

Ask an Expert

Having followed the discussion about oxo-biodegradable plastic for the past fifteen years, I have noticed that if decision-makers want to learn about it they don't turn to the experts in oxo-biodegradable polymer science. Instead they consult people in a different branch of science, or people who are not scientists at all. For example the UNEP report was written by a geologist; the Plymouth report was written by two biologists, the Eunomia Report was written by an engineer, and the EU Commission report was written by civil servants.

The 2017 Ellen MacArthur report was also written by someone who is not a scientist. He did eventually engage with OPA scientists, and then withdrew his allegation that oxo-biodegradable technology simply causes fragmentation.

If anyone wants to know about oxo-biodegradable plastic, the obvious place to start is with the Oxo-biodegradable Plastics Association, whose scientists have a lifetime of experience with the technology. Of course the OPA is a trade association but it is an invaluable source of information and advice, and should always be consulted before any decision is made. See <http://www.biodeg.org>

Something else I have noticed is the number of people who continue to confuse oxo-degradable plastic with oxo-biodegradable plastic. There are some who simply don't know the difference, but others will not use the correct terminology because they cannot bring themselves to admit that oxo-biodegradable plastic does become biodegradable – which is now established beyond doubt.

The Bag Banners

The bag banners are terrified that all their years and millions of dollars spent on creating plastiphobia in the public mind are being exposed as based almost entirely on emotion. It is now becoming obvious that a new single-use plastic bag is much less likely to spread disease than a cloth bag that you have used a dozen times, or a paper bag that disintegrates if it gets wet.

They are aware that the plastics industry in both the US and Europe have appealed to government to stop the single-use plastic bans, so the banners are resorting to their usual attacks on “big business trying to serve its own interests.” However, any company that has ever produced anything useful to mankind has also been serving its own interests.

The issue is not big business v little people, but whether there was ever any scientific justification for plastiphobia. The banners complain about the effect of lobbying by the plastics industry, but that is exactly what they had themselves been doing to secure the bans in the first place.

Their lobbying is still continuing, and on 21st April their lobbyists persuaded a large number of (quite) eminent people to write to The Times claiming that microplastics are injurious to health, and that for some unexplained reason single-use plastic would “expose some of the world's most vulnerable people to climate change and plastic pollution.”

Microplastics are caused by the fragmentation of ordinary plastic due to weathering, but plastiphobia ignores the simple solution – make them oxo-biodegradable so that they biodegrade instead of lying around in the environment for decades. As to climate-change, all too often this is used as justification for almost anything the environmental lobby want to compel us to do, but the LCAs show that plastic bags have a lower potential for global warming than cloth or paper. Nor do they deplete fossil resources, because they are made from a by-product of oil which would be extracted for fuels whether plastics existed or not.

Recycling

The world's plastic recycling problem isn't going away, by Prof. Mikko Paunio of Helsinki University

“In 2015, the problem of marine litter climbed to the very top of the list of global environmental problems after a landmark study suggested that there are 100 million tonnes of plastic in the oceans. Regrettably, the study overlooked the share of the blame that can be put on recycling policies, which have caused the export of 106 million tonnes of plastic waste to Asia over the past 20 years or more. A significant proportion of this is thought to have ended up in the oceans.”

“Last June, I sounded the alarm about the impact of recycling on marine pollution and revealed how unscrupulous operators were making the situation worse. Soon afterward, the UK audit office came to similar conclusions and the media started to give the issue some attention.”

“There is now a global congestion in waste management systems, because China decided to close its doors to imported plastic waste. There has also been a rapid increase of piles of plastic scrap in rich countries, as it becomes increasingly difficult to find anyone who will accept it. Even poor countries have been starting to reject it because, with their poor waste-management systems, they are unable to cope with the increased volumes that western exporters would like them to take. Much of this material is ending up in the oceans.”

“Earlier this month, however, an obscure United Nations conference surprised the world by agreeing a global deal to curb the dumping of dirty plastic waste, often camouflaged as ‘recycling’, from rich countries to the developing nations, such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, Malaysia and Vietnam, who had become the chief importers of plastic waste now that China has closed its doors. The huge volumes of waste that have previously gone to Asia will now have to be dealt with at home, by a waste management industry that is already struggling to keep its head above the rising tide of rubbish.”

“Remarkably, there has been virtually no attention given to this important decision. Green NGOs and politicians are keeping quiet because they fear that their role in promoting recycling policies in the past will come under scrutiny. The media, however, which has published green dogma about recycling for years will struggle to avoid mentioning the problems that the industry is facing in the wake of this UN decision. The plastic situation is now deteriorating rapidly, especially in rich countries.”

“The EU, meanwhile, is making things even worse. It has just passed cosmetic legislation, in the shape of a foolish single-use plastics directive, a knee-jerk response to pressure from environmentalists. But even more worrying are the repercussions of the UN decision on the EU’s Circular Economy Package, which was agreed 12 months ago. The package imposes binding recycling targets that are impossible to achieve.”

“There is no way Europe can recycle 55 per cent of its plastic packaging by 2030, no matter how much is spent in the attempt. The result is likely to be a social, environmental and economic nightmare.”

“Twenty years ago, blind adherence to green ideology led to a waste catastrophe in the Italian region of Campania. Piles of waste lined the streets, and rubbish collections came to a halt because there was

nowhere left to take them, and the countryside became contaminated with dioxins as people resorted to bonfires to deal with the problem. The army had to be brought in to prevent a breakdown of public order.”

“Eventually, over many years, the problem was resolved by shipping the waste at vast expense to

incinerators in other parts of Europe. The lesson of Campania is therefore one that politicians and officials would do well to heed. Green dogma currently holds sway in the EU, but expansion of incineration capacity is likely to be the only way that governments will avoid a plastic waste disaster that will make Campania look like a walk in the park.”

“The EU Commission has argued in favour of incineration, but only very rarely. In a paper entitled, ‘A Clean Planet for All’, released before the UN Katowice Climate Change Conference, it argued for a carbon-neutral economy fuelled by biomass, although it was reticent about explaining where this biomass should come from. The answer is found in an accompanying document, which explains that it will actually be waste that is burned, and suggests that incineration capacity should increase to 100 million tonnes in 2050.”

The UK takes Notice

In April 2020 the Minister for Energy granted consent for an onshore electricity generating station in the London Borough of Bexley, which comprises:

- an energy recovery facility with a generating capacity of around 76MW. It is expected to take an annual waste throughput of up to 805,920 tonnes;
- an anaerobic digestion facility with an annual waste throughput of up to 40,000 tonnes of green and food waste;
- enabling infrastructure for combined heat and power;
- solar voltaic panels with a generating capacity of around 1MW;
- a battery storage facility with a capacity of around 20MW;

This will mean that instead of wasting plastic, and other materials by sending them to landfill; or wasting time, money, and fossil resources by trying to recycle every scrap of plastic however unsuitable, the waste plastic will be put to good use to generate electricity and reduce reliance on oil and gas.

Michael Stephen

Michael Stephen is a lawyer and was a member of the United Kingdom Parliament, where he served on the Environment Select Committee.

When he left Parliament Symphony Environmental Technologies Plc. attracted his attention because of his interest in the environment.

He is now Deputy Chairman of Symphony, which is listed on the AIM market of the London Stock Exchange, and is the founder and Chairman of the Oxo-biodegradable Plastics Association.

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