

Plastiphobia, Malaysia and a Case Against Compostables and Paper

Michael Stephen, a spokesperson from the bioplastics industry, shares his thoughts and opinion on important issues impacting the bioplastics industry. Today, Michael writes about plastiphobia, Malaysia and on the city of Exeter being against Compostables and Paper.



Michael Stephen

More on Plastiphobia

In a recent interview in Die Welt the new EU Commissioner for Environment, Virginijus Sinkevicius, considered the implications of a general ban on plastic packaging.

His comments come at a time when many bodies are arguing that bans of plastic packaging may actually be doing more harm than good. According to a report published by Green Alliance, (mentioned in my column on 14th January) firms are increasingly turning towards non-plastic alternatives, such as paper and plastic, that might ultimately be more harmful to the planet in terms of CO2 emissions.

In response to Sinkevicius' comments, Dr. Martin Engelmann, Managing Director of the German Plastics Packaging Association said: "The Commissioner should ask himself how his statement will be received by those who are about to decide on investments in recyclable packaging or recycling plants. If politicians

exclude plastic packaging from the circular economy, these urgently needed investments will certainly not be made.”

“Some politicians are currently suggesting to consumers and voters that blanket bans can be used to overcome the major challenges in environmental and climate protection,” Engelmann continued.

“Unfortunately, they forget to mention the contribution plastic packaging makes, for example, to CO2 savings and food safety.”

Malaysia

It has been reported that Malaysia is now refusing to accept plastic waste exported from the UK.

The Malaysians are missing an opportunity. If they built a modern non-polluting incinerator near one of their ports they could import waste plastic as free fuel for generating their electricity. It has a high calorific value.

Recycling of low-value contaminated plastic does not make economic or environmental sense, for the reasons explained in my Column on 7th January, so the alleged contamination with d2w masterbatch is not relevant. It never was a strong argument, because the low-value plastic items for which d2w biodegradable technology is used, gets dumped in Malaysia – or at least it did.

Until the Malaysians build a suitable incinerator, the UK should itself use the calorific value in waste plastic, and not dump it in landfill. I have seen an amazing incinerator in Zurich which processes just about all kinds of waste (not just plastic) and does not emit pollution. They even find significant amounts of gold and other valuable metals in the ash! There are a few of these units in the UK, and there is no longer any justification for dumping plastic waste in landfill.

Exeter against “Compostables” and paper

In a Report published on 24th January, the City of Exeter in the UK says:

“Bioplastic packaging is often seen as a ‘green alternative’ to single-use plastic, but is this really the case? Cornstarch bags, for instance, are promoted as the answer to single-use plastic bags. Alas, they’re not. The truth is there is no truly viable end-of-life solution for them at the moment beyond incineration at Energy Recovery facilities.”

“Yes, corn is a natural product and not a finite resource (as long as we are able to grow crops – see GM), but it’s a monoculture, taking up land, reducing biodiversity, using vast amounts of energy and water to grow, harvest, and process into bags.”

“And the other selling-point of bioplastic – its ability to decompose – isn’t as straightforward as it is advertised to be. Bioplastic doesn’t usually rot under normal household composting circumstances, because the compost heap won’t get hot enough, and how many of them would actually find their way onto

a compost heap anyway? How many people have a compost heap? How many of these bags will just be thrown away?”

“According to letsrecycle.com, “WRAP [Waste and Resources Action Programme] said unless bioplastics are rapidly soluble or dispersible, a form of pre-treatment such as shredding is required to make them suitable for processing by wet anaerobic digestion.”

“In other words, they are too sturdy to be composted effectively even in industrial food waste processing facilities unless they are put through further energy-consuming processes, which isn’t going to happen for all sorts of reasons of impracticality.”

As to PAPER, they say “This is another example of making a problem worse by trying to make it better...or trying to look like you’re trying to make it better. Paper production and transportation is incredibly fuel- and energy- and water-intensive – much more so than thin plastic. It tends to result in the deforestation of old wood that is often replaced by a non-native monoculture, severely inhibiting the biodiversity essential for life on earth.”

“Think about all the fuel used in cutting down trees and hauling them. All the water and energy and chemicals used in pulping, bleaching, drying, cutting, transporting etc. So, the embedded carbon and environmental damage in a paper bag is significant.”

By contrast “A thin plastic bag is made using by-products of the oil-refining process or of natural gas production. While the impact of fossil fuel production on the environment has long been known, plastic uses under 10% of oil and gas extracted in Europe, with more than 80% being used for electricity, heating and transport. Both bioplastic and standard plastic materials will go through energy- and fuel-intensive processes. By avoiding plastic, we are not avoiding the consumption of fossil-fuels.”

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.

Earlier Postings in this Column

- 1/ 1/ 20 – [Plastiphobia, Microplastics and A Throw-Away Society](#)
- 7/ 1/ 20 – [Recycling, Lab Testing, Bangladesh and the Right Bioplastic](#)
- 14/1/20 – [Plastiphobia and Bioplastics Definitions](#)
- 21/1/20 – [Composting, the European Union and Unemployment](#)

Interview with Michael Stephen

- [Questions and Answers on OXO-Biodegradability](#)

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