

Recycling and Exporting Plastic Waste (FREE)

Michael Stephen, an international expert on bioplastics, shares his thoughts and opinion on important issues impacting the bioplastics industry. Today, Michael writes about recycling and exporting plastic waste. This is a free Article.



Recycling

The Managing Director of the trade association "Plastics Recyclers Europe," (PRE) Antonino Furfari, is getting into a bit of a panic about PAS 9017, realising that it supports oxo-biodegradable plastic. He has fired off a letter to Mr. S. Steedman (Director of Standards) at the British Standards Institute, complaining about "Note 7 – Compatibility of innovative polyolefin packaging entering the market with current recycling streams is covered by the protocols of Plastic Recyclers Europe (PRE)."

This is actually correct, but Mr. Forfari says "This text infers that polyolefins which have been designed to degrade ("innovative") can or could be "compatible" with current polymer streams covered by PRE protocols. This is simply not true and is misleading." He continues "The position of PRE regarding main stream polymers (polyolefins and others), which have been intentionally modified to degrade, is very clear and unambiguous. Such re-engineered polymers are "incompatible" with the current main stream polymers."

However, when you look at the PRE Recyclability Evaluation Protocol for PE films it does not support Mr. Forfari. It actually seeks to encourage innovation in the PE film market, and it does not say that oxo-biodegradable films would not pass the tests prescribed by the protocol. In fact OPA scientists tell me that an oxo-biodegradable plastic would quite easily pass the tests. They advise that the protocol is aimed mainly at excluding incompatible foreign materials, like compostable and biobased materials.

Recyclability is one of the issues often relied upon by those who are against oxo-biodegradable plastic, but there is no real substance in their complaint – see <https://www.biodeg.org/subjects-of-interest/recycling-2/> Recyclability is not a problem for oxo-biodegradable plastic but it is a serious problem for "compostable" and bio-based plastics which will certainly not pass the tests and would certainly compromise a recycling stream if they got into it. This is another reason why "compostable" plastic is almost completely useless, and survives in the market only because of a massive global PR and lobbying effort.

Exporting Plastic Waste

The Guardian reports that "The UK has been accused of failing to honour its promise to curb shipments of plastic waste to developing countries, after it emerged Britain's new post-Brexit regulations are less stringent than those imposed by the EU. From 1 January, shipments of unsorted plastic waste from the EU to non-OECD countries were banned."

But Britain will continue to allow plastic waste to be exported to developing countries under a new system of "prior informed consent" under which the importer has to agree to accept the waste, and has the opportunity to refuse it."

It seems to me that the UK is right about this and the EU is wrong. Recycling of plastic in developed countries often makes no sense in economic or environmental terms, but there are other countries where sorting and processing of plastic could be done safely and profitably and could provide employment. The exporter will therefore need to be satisfied that the plastic will be processed with due regard to human health and the environment, and will need to be able to prove it to the UK government. The local government in the country concerned also has a role to play, and the UK government should help if the local government do not have the resources for proper inspection and enforcement.

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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