

EUROPEAN TRENDS TO PROGRESS TOWARDS CAPTURING THE FULL VALUE OF USED PLASTICS

Jan-Erik Johansson¹

¹ Programme Director Resource Efficiency, PlasticsEurope
e-mail: jan-erik.johansson@plasticseurope.org

Abstract

There are 5 key considerations around plastics and waste: landfilling, waste prevention, collection schemes, recycling and energy recovery.

Strong links exist among these and they must be considered in combination and implemented in a fully integrated approach:

(1) a legal hurdle to landfill waste plastics is a pre-requisite and subsequently all options referred to in the Waste Framework Directive will be necessary to accommodate the waste plastics which is currently landfilled.

(2) plastics are well positioned to become the champions of prevention strategies but this needs to be better understood,

(3) all waste plastics must be properly collected and directed to sound treatment options among which

(4) a high quality recycling sector with less focus on quantitative targets and seeking the synergies with

(5) high efficient energy recovery (MSWI and SRF) will be the key to success.

Our proposed way forward to reach the ultimate goal of diverting 100% of waste plastics from landfill to a mix of recovery options is:

a) Strongly support any legal means to prevent landfilling of high calorific waste (incl. plastics).

Our industry will promote phase out of landfill and support legal instruments to avoid landfill either by bans or other legal instruments. Since waste-owners always choose the cheapest legal option, zero-landfill instruments will drive investments down the chain for waste recovery and trigger adequate and aligned collection schemes.

b) Build a strong waste prevention case and embrace, and pro-actively shape, the waste prevention debate.

We will put prevention as a core message to communicate to stakeholders; and to advocate for, and steer towards, prevention as a key focus for EU member state's resource policy, in line with the intentions of the EU Commission.

We must move the debate from recycling to prevention – which is top of the waste hierarchy.

A three-step approach needs to be followed. First, we need to understand the focus of the policy makers. We can then build the case along with the value chain to finally be able to interact with the legislative process and communicate the benefits of plastics in meeting their objectives.

c) Advocate for the extension of collection for recycling and recovery of all waste plastics.

The past approach has been focused on avoiding separate, i.e. material specific, collection of plastics and related high costs. Even so, it was known that some cost-efficient, material specific, schemes do exist across Europe and it was recognized that such schemes should not be altered. However, to maximize the sustainability opportunity for plastics we need to promote collection for recycling and recovery of more than plastic bottles (or other specific applications). We therefore recommend the development of aligned 100% post-consumer waste collection schemes and will promote these. One preferred concept is the 'dry-bin' concept (collection of various recyclables including all plastics packaging, metal and paper recyclables and potentially other plastics i.e. plastic toys, small WEEE, ...) which we will advocate for when new or upgraded schemes are considered.

The collection of waste, however, must always be considered in line with appropriate downstream infrastructure for sorting and reprocessing. As far as complex technical applications are concerned, plastic streams most often arise after a product-dismantling step or shredding process (WEEE, ELV, ...) organized for other purposes than plastics recycling (i.e. Health & Safety, metals recycling, ...). Following the proposed approach, however, such subsequent plastic-rich streams must be kept out of landfills and dedicated to recovery routes.

What must be prevented is that increased collection jeopardizes the value from the current collection.

d) Stimulate the "quality recycling" sector.

The focus for European legislation and for many member states has been, and still is, on quantitative recycling targets. Such quantity-oriented recycling obligations have, in many cases, resulted in volume optimization instead of quality of outputs. As a consequence some of the material collected for recycling has been of low

quality making further processing in Europe non competitive compared to exports outside the EU for recycling and reprocessing.

To reverse this trend, and support building a sustainable EU recycling industry, focus needs to be put on supporting the quality of the recycling value chain. This can be done by securing that collection and sorting is joined up with suitable infrastructure; supporting recyclers to improve their quality standards to achieve better competitiveness; and by encouraging the waste management industry to invest into state-of-the-art automated sorting & reprocessing hardware, which can offset the cost disadvantage of labour in Europe.

e) Strongly support efficient Energy from Waste options (incl SRF & MSWI) within a “balanced” approach that supports all waste management options.

PlasticsEurope has been promoting energy recovery for many years. We will continue support and promote high efficiency energy recovery **but** clearly highlighting that this is a complement to recycling *when this is not environmentally and economically beneficial*. It is assumed that particularly Solid Recovered Fuel options have the potential to reach acceptance and acknowledgment, and should therefore be supported as a priority.