

A pioneering plastic economy for Europe

The EU's Plastics Strategy shows impressive leadership, says Clarissa Morawski, managing director of the non-profit organisation Reloop, which is dedicated to advancing Europe's shift to a circular economy.

Tackling plastic packaging and waste is a vital step towards meeting the strategy's ambitious goals.



“One of the biggest end-uses for plastic in Europe is packaging,” says Ms Morawski. “Unlike construction and building materials, which also use a lot of plastic but will be around for 20 to 25 years, packaging is consumed and discarded very quickly. Recycling rates are also low, so this area requires serious attention.” The strategy calls for all plastic packaging to be reusable or capable of being recycled cost effectively by 2030. The EU also wants to see plastic recycling reach similar levels to other packaging materials such as paper, glass and metals.

Collection and recycling rates must be ramped up urgently to achieve this, Ms Morawski believes. “We need better and more different types of collection systems. It’s also important to collect all of the clean material available, gathering it as far upstream and as well sorted as possible.” The technology already exists to separate dry waste into clean fractions for recycling. “Near-infrared technology can identify different types of plastic shapes and colours. We need to invest in more of these machines.” Educating both businesses and consumers should help improve the quantity and quality of collections, she thinks. “But it’s important to design and extend collection networks for the vast majority of people, who are ultimately lazy, and make it as easy as possible.”

Although not included in the strategy, new laws on the recycled content of plastic and plastic products would help increase the market share and use of recycled plastic, with a knock-on effect on collection and recycling, Ms Morawski reckons. “The price of oil, and therefore plastic procurement costs, fluctuates which provides an insecure marketplace for investment in collection, sorting and processing systems. If legislators introduce mandated minimums for recycled content, producers can do the right thing without worrying that their competition will not. It creates a level playing field.”



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Changes in store

The EU's strategy lays the groundwork for a new plastic economy, where products are designed and made with reuse, repair and recycling in mind, and more sustainable materials are developed and promoted. But the shift to a more circular system will mean big changes for players throughout the chain, according to Ms Morawski. "Retailers will have to take more ownership of what they sell. They'll need to think about the content of their packaging and who is supplying their products. In some cases, they may have to take back old items, such as via collection bins."

"Brand owners will also have to completely change their way of thinking," she adds. "Their designers will need to engage fully with recyclers. They'll also need to rethink relationships with existing EPR [extended producer responsibility] providers, to consider if they're providing what's needed – access to material and a high collection rate of what they're putting on the market. If not, they'll have to find alternatives, either alone or with like-minded companies."

Changes are in store for the waste management sector, too. "If you're in the business of sorting, landfilling and incinerating, you'll have to start thinking of the future where these methods of disposal are a very small and diminishing part of your trade," says Ms Morawski. "Every tonne of material kept out of landfill and in circulation is way more valuable. Any company that makes money from putting waste in the ground or burning it needs to expand their service to provide value to that material. If you're a progressive company, that's the way forward."

The LIFE programme has an important role to play in sharing best practices and in bringing different parts of the value chain together, she believes. "The plastic chain includes many different industries and sectors, from brand owners and retailers to waste management and logistics companies. They don't naturally come together to talk," Ms Morawski points out. "But LIFE could help facilitate discussions between product designers and recyclers, for instance. If recyclers highlighted which materials are problematic – perhaps their colour makes them difficult to recycle in automated systems, or they contain a particular glue – then designers would know to avoid them when developing their products." This could help make plastic items more circular and cut down on waste. She concludes, "With its legislation and programmes such as LIFE, the EU can bring people together to exchange information and flesh out good circular models that add value to plastic."