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EUROPEAN UNION EU

Event Summary

Circular Lunch: “Plastics in a Circular Economy – Friend or Foe?”

European Parliament, A5G375, April 19th, 2016

Sirpa Pietikäinen, president of GLOBE EU, opened the event by emphasizing the importance of having access to the knowledge of the various actors involved to push regulation where needed and implement practices where they prove effective.

Rob Opsomer (Ellen McArthur Foundation) presented the EMAF’s recent report on plastics. He qualified plastics as the archetypical linear mass material with benefits as well as challenges. The report intends to be a blueprint of what a better plastics economy could be like. The EMAF will launch a three-year initiative in May 2016 to mobilize the recommendations of the report. These would include setting up a global cross-value chain cooperation vehicle; developing a Global Plastics Protocol to avoid fragmentation in dealings with plastics; promoting large-scale innovation (including new business models) to make best practices available at a global level; and engaging with policy makers.

Christina von Westernhagen (Dow Chemicals Company) expressed the company’s wish list for the forthcoming Plastics Strategy: not only should it be science driven, it should also promote the benefits of plastics and aim to improve performance. Also, the strategy should address the deficiencies of current plastics use. Ideally, all plastics should be recycled, which necessitates ongoing innovation across value chains. Christina touched on Dow’s involvement in the Ocean Conservancy project to stem the flow of plastics into the ocean and expressed Dow’s support for the EMAF’s recommendations for a new plastics economy.

Ramon Arriata (Interface) argued that the whole life-cycle of a product should be considered when addressing the issue of plastics recycling. He stressed the importance of product redesign: using different raw materials and how these are put together to lower the CO₂ impact per square meter carpet. Indeed, Interface uses abandoned fishing nets as well as waste materials from glass recycling. Enabling flexible manufacturing would allow for the use of a wider range of raw materials. In spite of this, using waste materials remains a challenge: product manufacturers should receive incentives to use different materials; this would ultimately benefit recyclers as well.

Henry Saint Bris (SUEZ) mentioned that, currently, only 8% of plastics are recycled in the EU. Many waste materials are exported to low-cost countries. He expressed concern about the cost-gap between virgin and recycled plastics (fossil fuel vs. people) and called for measures to stimulate demand and guarantee quality thresholds for recycled plastic. Equally important are enhanced green public procurement standards and government support to reduce the price difference between virgin and recycled plastics. France's environmental agency ADEME has initiated a program to help companies overcome the price difference between virgin and recycled plastics; China has introduced a 0% VAT on recycled materials. The EU should consider guidance for member states who wish to do the same.

Helmut Maurer (European Commission) commented on the Plastics Strategy foreseen for 2017. The strategy is a joint effort by DG GROW and DG ENV, coordinated by the Secretariat General. He felt strongly that manufacturers should be on board to support waste prevention and improve product design to get better recyclable products and materials. He argued to tackle issues from a product and not from a waste perspective, and called for large-scale recycling facilities. He agreed with earlier suggestions that producers should receive incentives to help focus on product design.

Sirpa Pietikäinen opened the debate with questions about the application of Horizon funds and the need for backcasting: what do we have to start doing now to ultimately have a waste-free society? She asked if the leasing of chemicals (extended producer responsibility for polymers) could be an option and wanted to know how to deal with composite materials. Also, what can be done in the context of a global plastics protocol to identify materials to increase collection? What kind of economic incentives should be considered to overcome current price differences between virgin and recycled materials?

Jo Leinen agreed with the Commission's focus on waste prevention and product design but wanted to learn more about the instruments available. He stated that low oil prices would be with us for the foreseeable future and asked about incentives to protect industry and safeguard expertise. With the bio economy in mind, he wanted to know if plastics could be produced in future without using fossil fuel.

Karl-Heinz Florenz, finally, wanted to know if the Commission had been successful in its efforts to prevent waste (e.g., electronic waste directive).

Reactions from the floor included comments about the recycling industry's "zero plastics to landfill campaign", which was deemed the single most effective measure to ensure the availability of materials for recycling. Also, better implementation of already existing landfill bans and the separate collection systems for plastic would help the industry. Legislation can be better enforced if the rules are clear and simple. Also, a fast-track procedure in case of evident non-compliance was called for. Deposits were mentioned as another instrument to help improve sorting. Regarding electronic waste, participants felt that recyclers should cooperate with manufacturers on the marking or color-coding of certain materials. The digital revolution was mentioned as enabling the tracing and identification of materials in a circular economy to improve collection and recycling.

Others participants felt that the issue was simply that of too much packaging being used and believed that addressing consumption patterns was necessary as well. The objective should be to provide the same level of protection but with less packaging. Consumer preference was deemed an obstacle but some stakeholders felt that manufacturers should take responsibility for educating consumers.

Biomaterials will not replace current plastics production based on fossil fuels. This means that incineration with energy recovery cannot be avoided although it was widely felt that the practice should be limited as much as possible. Indeed, incineration can be worse than dumping: dumped materials can possibly be used again; what is burned is gone forever. While Member States should be responsible for waste prevention and facilitating waste reuse and with adequate systems for separate waste collection in place, only what remains should be allowed for energy recovery.

Some argued that a stronger focus on eco-design was not necessarily helpful since eco-design is very energy-centric, not material-centric. Other participants felt that too much focus on durability could hamper technological progress. Easy replacement and upgrades of parts could be equally effective.

The price of raw materials used was considered an important factor in product design. Likewise, the quality and durability of plastic goods which are not packaging material was considered relevant. It was felt that there should be a system in place where retailers could take back large plastic items and find different recycling channels.

It was further mentioned that only single waste streams were addressed in the current waste proposals, not combined or composite materials. This creates a loophole that can be easily solved by adding the words: "and any combination thereof". The technology to recycle

composite material is available but a market for these materials remains elusive. Material identification (a “passport” or “fingerprint”) was considered crucial to allow leapfrogging the current issues.

In his concluding remarks, **Karl-Heinz Florenz** thanked Sirpa and GLOBE EU for the initiative. He regretted that eighty percent of what was discussed did not appear on the agenda of the European Parliament but was interested to learn that a lack of demand for recycled materials was considered a key obstacle to recycling.