

A Circular Future with Plastics

Keynote speech by Commissioner Elżbieta Bieńkowska at the European Plastics Converters Annual Conference

Thank you for inviting me here today: being here in Milan gives me a chance to engage with you, the heart of the plastic industry.

The benefits that plastics bring to our society and our economy are not put into question by the EU Plastics Strategy.

In fact plastics are making an important contribution to the de-carbonization of our economy.

For example, light and innovative materials in packaging have saved CO2 emissions in transport and have reduced food waste while ensuring food safety.

Nevertheless, these benefits are being outweighed by the cost. Too little is recycled and much is disposed incorrectly and inefficiently.

Today less than 30% of plastic waste generated in the EU is recycled.

Littering and leakage in the environment has very negative impacts on land and sea life.

This is generating a growing demand for action.

Of course, this is not a call for a plastic-free economy.

But plastics need to become sustainable and circular – keeping intact its functionalities while reducing its negative impact – It is the only way forward.

Since 2015, the Juncker Commission launched an ambitious Circular Economy Action Plan.

It is designed to change the way partners in the value chain should interact in order to increase the circularity of production and consumption patterns in a systematic way.

It aims at transforming the classical linear “take, make, waste” approach into a circular approach where the value of resource is kept in the economy for as long as possible.

Based on these principles we developed the Plastics Strategy.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

For this industry becoming environmentally sustainable and the most innovative and competitive in the world, we must acknowledge and define the challenges that lie ahead.

Firstly, we need to create a market for recycled plastic and to reduce the huge amount of plastic waste going to incineration and landfill – up to 10 million tons.

The plastic demand in the EU is about 49 million tons annually. The main driver is the packaging sector, followed by the construction and automotive sectors.

Currently, only 2 to 3 million tons of plastic waste is being recycled.

This is dangerous for the environment and makes no sense from a circular economy point of view.

We are destroying considerable value that should instead be kept in the production loop.

Moreover, I am sure you were all surprised by the Chinese when they introduced a ban on plastic waste imports.

And we even see African countries taking bold action. You will have heard about the ban of plastic bags in Kenya.

This puts us all under pressure to act.

It is a wake-up call for Europeans: an opportunity for our industry and for our policy to fully reap the potential of the circular economy.

For this to become an opportunity for the EU industry, we need to work towards the integration of the value chains.

As you will know, we have launched a pledging campaign for industrial sectors. This is a perfect opportunity for us all to kick-off this new cooperative approach!

We want to incorporate 10 million tons of recycled plastic into new products, every year, by 2025. This is ambitious but also realistic.

We are also reaching out to other actors. They can play a positive role in this mutual effort: regional and municipal authorities.

Their contribution is essential in this effort: better sorting and collection of waste is the foundation of higher quality recycling.

Plastic solutions should be designed to be more suitable for reuse, recyclable and degradability.

On recycling, the chemical additives of plastics can pose problems.

Here, the Commission is doing its part.

In line with our Communication from January on the Interface between Chemicals, Wastes and Products Regulations, we will clarify which additives are acceptable in recycled plastics.

We will trace the presence of such additives to inform recyclers, the users of recyclates and – where relevant – consumers.

The Commission is also committed to work towards fully biodegradable plastics. We are happy to join forces with industry on the necessary research and investment efforts.

Standards play of course a critical role in this context – be it for recyclates, biodegradability or secondary raw materials.

Ladies and Gentlemen: implementing the actions of the Plastics Strategy is challenging.

And I know that there are two actions that are of particular concern for you.

The first is the so-called “plastics levy”.

The Commission proposal for the next Multiannual Financial Framework contains a Plastic-based Own Resource.

Let me be clear: It is not a tax. It’s a tool to drive investments and research into the right direction.

And it is fully in line with subsidiarity. Member States are free to take the appropriate measures to reduce plastic pollution. The subsidiarity principle applies in this case.

We also hear concerns from you about the single-use plastic proposal that we will adopt next week.

As you may know, plastic littering is fuelled by the growing consumption of ‘single-use’ articles made of plastics, rarely recycled and prone to being littered.

These items include small packaging, bags, disposable cups, lids, straws and cutlery.

The data collected confirm that **single-use plastic** items represent **50% of marine litter**, many being packaging for food and drink.

We are aware that 90% of the plastic pollution in the marine environment is not from the EU.

But still, this remains a huge environmental concern and a **waste of valuable resources**. We need to address it in order to protect our beaches and oceans.

With the proposal next week, we will make sure that we will all use the affordable and available alternatives to plastics as soon as possible.

We do not want to fragment the Internal Market by creating internal barriers or competitive imbalances. Thus be sure that the Commission will continue to monitor developments.

Ladies and gentlemen, the European Commission relies now on your

contribution.

During the past year, we have defined together how the future of the plastics economy in Europe can be: innovative, sustainable and circular.

We need to continue to work together.

National, local and regional authorities play role in the waste management and procurement of plastic products.

The Commission will streamline the regulatory framework and create the necessary conditions for the Circular Economy objectives to be achievable.

But most of all, we need you to be ambitious and set the pace towards a sustainable and circular plastics economy.

Thank you.