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Europe's PVC industry looks to the future

By Charlotte Eyre

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Last month, the European PVC industry unveiled a new set of objectives for sustainable development to 2020 following the success of Vinyl 2010 - an initiative which led to the industry collecting and recycling over 250,000 tonnes of PVC every year. Last year, 260,284 tonnes of unregulated post-consumer PVC waste were recycled by the network of PVC recyclers across Europe, more than the initial goal of 200,000 tonnes for 2010.

Buoyed by this success, the industry has drawn up a new range of targets as part of VinylPlus.

Speaking to European Plastics News, chairman Josef Ertl said: "VinylPlus is a continuation of Vinyl 2010, which was a great success, so we are trying to continue these achievements. We met our first targets and are now looking at new targets and even more ambitious targets - we have five challenges to fulfil."

The VinylPlus programme is based on five commitments which address concerns about organochlorine emissions, sustainable use of additives, energy efficiency, using renewable energy and raw materials in PVC production, and promoting sustainability throughout the value chain.

"We are looking at controlled loop management for more efficient use and control of PVC throughout its lifecycle, and at promoting sustainable technologies and reducing energy and raw material use," said Ertl. "Another goal is reducing specific energy consumption by 20%."

In terms of organochlorine emissions, VinylPlus will look at stopping these accumulating in nature, while in transportation, the programme will bring in risk assessment measures for transporting raw materials.

But perhaps the most ambitious goal of VinylPlus is to achieve a PVC recycling rate of 800,000 tonnes per annum.

Ertl said that recycling 800,000 tonnes of PVC per year is a big challenge "as around 100,000 tonnes will be difficult-to-recycle materials, for example composites or contaminated materials".

To help encourage a large number of companies involved in the PVC manufacturing chain to join the programme, VinylPlus has enlisted the help of a 'critical friend' - The Natural Step (TNS), an international NGO which looks at sustainable development.

As well as giving advice, TNS will help VinylPlus engage with stakeholders.

"Stakeholder participation helps VinylPlus know how stakeholders outside the industry view our moves," said Ertl. "We have to take their opinions into account very seriously."

In a statement, David Cook, TNS executive ambassador, said people making procurement decisions generally welcome the chance to make better choices and to see suppliers responding actively to their needs and the sustainability standards they are working towards. Vinyl 2010 is a rare example of an industry managing to turn itself around through voluntary action, he added.

VinylPlus is introducing a VinylPlus product label to help consumers differentiate between products. It will show they are buying something made from recycled PVC, therefore using up fewer natural resources.

Ertl says the label will also help encourage non-participants to become involved in the scheme, particularly converters. According to VinylPlus, all of the European PVC resin and stabiliser producers, as well as the high molecular plasticiser producers contribute, but not all of the 20,000 PVC converters in Europe are so keen.

"We are spending a lot of money and efforts on this project - around €7-8m per year - to improve the sustainability and image of PVC," said Ertl. "Not all companies in the value chain are contributing financially but they benefit from PVC's good image and the work of Vinyl 2010."

Like Vinyl 2010, VinylPlus will be monitored by an independent committee with representatives of the European Parliament, European Commission, trade unions, retailers and consumer organisations. Participants include the European Council of Vinyl Manufacturers, the European Plastics Converters, the European Stabiliser Producers Association and the European Council for Plasticisers and Intermediates.

Earlier this year, Vinyl 2010 released its final progress report, saying it met or exceeded all the targets set by the industry in 2000, particularly when it comes to collection and recycling.

"In 1999 there was no infrastructure for recycling PVC in Europe and it was often dismissed as an unrecyclable material," the report says. "Today, results show that in 2010 260,284 tonnes of unregulated post-consumer PVC waste were recycled by Vinyl 2010's network of PVC recyclers across Europe."

The report also confirms that certain additives have been phased out of the PVC production process ahead of schedule across the EU, including cadmium. Lead substitution is ahead of schedule and well on track to be replaced completely by 2015.

The use of plasticiser in Europe has evolved from low to high molecular weight phthalates and - to a smaller extent - some non-phthalates plasticisers. HMW phthalates (DINP, DIDP, DPHP) today represent over 70% of the plasticiser market in Europe.

Other achievements include the development of new technologies for recycling, and the launch of multi-stakeholder platforms to discuss and promote sustainable resource management.



Josef Ertl: Even more ambitious targets than Vinyl 2010