Position of European Bioplastics

THE GLOBAL PLASTICS POLLUTION AGREEMENT: OBJECTIVES, SCOPE, OBLIGATIONS, AND MEASURES AHEAD OF INC2

Global transition to non-fossil plastics to tackle plastic pollution at its roots

European Bioplastics supports an ambitious global plastics treaty, which catalyses the transition to non-fossil biobased plastics and leverages innovative biodegradable and compostable plastics to help end plastic pollution by 2040.

Biobased, biodegradable and compostable plastics can contribute to ending plastics pollution by:

1) Reducing the growing negative climate impacts of plastics by replacing virgin fossil feedstocks with non-fossil biobased feedstocks. Plastics production is currently 90% based on virgin fossil raw materials.1

2) Reducing single-use plastics coupled with substitution of non-recyclable plastics with certified compostable material can play an important role in minimizing ocean plastic pollution whilst helping reduce overall GHG emissions.

The transition to non-fossil biobased plastics is critical to address the growing climate impacts of plastics

In 2019, the contribution of plastic to climate change is considered to be 1.8 billion metric tons of greenhouse gas emissions, or 3.4 per cent of global emissions. 90 per cent of those emissions come from plastics production and the conversion from fossil fuels. By 2060, emissions from the plastics lifecycle are set to more than double compared to 2020, reaching 4.3 billion tonnes of GHG emissions.2

Addressing the climate impacts of plastics should be an objective of the global plastics treaty to fully address all aspects of plastics pollution and to ensure alignment with the Paris Agreement.

The transition to a climate neutral plastics economy requires a shift towards non-fossil biobased plastics in addition to efforts to remove, reduce, reuse and recycle.3 Biobased plastics are made from renewable sources, such as organic waste, lignocellulosic, and agro-based feedstocks. Renewable feedstocks for biobased plastics must be sustainably sourced.

Biobased non-fossil feedstocks for plastics can provide immediate reductions of greenhouse gas from plastics and reduce reliance on fossil raw materials. A study carried out for the European Commission shows that if just 10% of EU plastics switch from fossil to non-fossil sustainable biobased feedstocks, it would result in annual reductions of 4.4 Mt of fossil feedstocks and GHG emission reductions of 6.2 Mt of CO₂-eq.4 This is a conservative estimate, with only 30% GHG emission savings from biobased plastics compared to equivalent fossil plastics.

Substitution with more sustainable systems alternatives to tackle plastic pollution

Biodegradation is a natural biochemical process during which microorganisms present in the environment convert biodegradable materials into carbon dioxide, water, and biomass. While conventional plastics do not decompose at the end of their life, plastics referred to as ‘biodegradable’ are designed to decompose at the end of their life by the conversion of all their organic constituents (polymers and organic additives).5 ‘Compostable plastics’ are a subset of biodegradable plastics designed to biodegrade under controlled conditions, typically through industrial composting in special facilities for composting or anaerobic digestion without negative effects to the compost, i.e. the outcome of organic recycling.

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5 Commission’s Group of Chief Scientific Advisors, Biodegradability of plastics in the open environment | European Commission (europa.eu) ; European Commission, EU policy framework on bio-based, bio-degradable and compostable plastics COM/2022(682)
Compostable plastics provide added value through organic recycling as an additional waste treatment option. Compostable plastics are proven to enhance the quality and quantity of the collection and recycling of biowaste (incl. food waste) and therefore enhance the systems ability to return carbon to soil.

Technical global standards developed by the International Organization for Standardization, such as ISO 17088 - Specification for compostable plastics, ISO 18606 – Specification for organic recycling of packaging, ISO 23517:2021 – Specification for soil biodegradable mulch film and ISO 16620 – for biobased content of biobased plastics, provide clear guidance for the safe and sustainable development and management of these materials. Intrinsically biodegradable plastics do not release persistent microplastics and can be advantageously used in agricultural applications or whenever the risk of accidental dispersion into the environment is high.6

A recent report commissioned by the Pew Foundation found that hard-to-recycle plastics could be substituted with sustainable alternatives such as compostable materials, with the remaining plastic waste being recycled at much higher rates, resulting in much less plastic polluting the environment. According to the report, paper, coated paper, and compostable materials can substitute 17 per cent of plastic waste generated by 2040, equivalent to 71 million metric tons of plastic, without fundamentally decreasing the performance, affordability, or social and environmental acceptability of packaging and single-use items. The intervention plays an important role in minimizing ocean plastic pollution and could help reduce overall GHG emissions.7

The way forward in the global plastics treaty

The global plastics treaty could support the shift to sustainable non-fossil renewable plastics by:

1) Adding as a core obligations (a) target(s) for biobased feedstocks for production of virgin plastics;

2) Defining targets for the uptake of certified compostable plastics as a complementary step to promoting the uptake of recycled plastics and organic recycling more widely;

3) Adding a requirement to establish criteria for the sustainable sourcing of renewable feedstocks for biobased plastics, taking into account relevant national circumstances.

4) Proposing measures to be included in national action plans to promote biobased feedstocks, and bio-economy based systems that promote the use of certified compostable plastics in line with meeting the objectives of the treaty, such as tax incentives, minimum requirements on use of non-fossil feedstocks, green public procurement, etc. These could be listed in an Annex to the instrument.

5) Requiring the use of certified soil biodegradable mulch films where such films are below 25 microns.

6) Promoting investments to deploy feedstock diversification for plastics production of plastics as a part of the means of implementation of the treaty.

7) Requiring national reporting on the progress in substituting virgin fossil feedstocks for plastics production as well as moves to alternative sustainable systems for hard-to-recycle plastics.

About European Bioplastics

European Bioplastics (EUBP) represents the interests of more than 80 member companies throughout the European Union. With members from the entire value chain, European Bioplastics serves as both a contact platform and catalyst for advancing the objectives of the growing bioplastics industry. For further information, please visit http://european-bioplastics.org.

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