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A new approach to the problem of plastic waste

A report launched today by the RTF partners (CIWM, ESA, the Resource Association and WRAP) at the 2018 conference in London, entitled 'Eliminating avoidable plastic waste by 2042: a use-based approach to decision and policy making', has developed a novel use-phase model to categorise plastic products. This approach allows for targeted actions to be defined based on the different environmental impacts of each category and also helps clarify how these can be set within a holistic policy framework.

In assessing the complexity of the landscape to define the most effective ways of tackling plastic waste, including improving domestic market demand for secondary plastics, the overarching messages from the research include:

- Eliminating avoidable plastics waste will require a series of interventions throughout the supply chain that both incentivise sustainable design and production choices, and stimulate demand for secondary plastics. In this context, Extended Producer Responsibility has significant potential to be developed into a more holistic framework for improving the value proposition to underpin the additional reprocessing capacity, market uptake, and consumer communications that are needed to close the loop on plastics
- A much clearer roadmap for bioplastics is also critical – these materials have significant potential to provide solutions in some areas but unchecked could also have a significant detrimental impact on current plastics recycling. Their potential needs to be clearly mapped and articulated to allow informed decision-making and reduce confusion about their properties and environmental performance.
- There also needs to be a renewed focus on non-packaging plastics. Packaging waste dominates the current debate because of its visible impact on the landscape and oceans. In terms of developing a long term framework to eliminate all avoidable plastics waste, however, interventions will be needed across the plastics spectrum.

Against the backdrop of the Government's ambition to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste by 2042, the research, carried out by Resources Future and Nextek, adopts a system of categorisation based on the length of time plastics are used:

- very short use phase (<1 day) small format e.g. cotton buds, plastic stirrers
- very short use phase (<1 day) medium format e.g. disposable cups, takeaway containers
- short use phase (>1 day <2 years) e.g. food and cosmetics packaging
- medium use phase (>2 <12 years) e.g. car parts, electronics
- long use phase (>12 years) e.g. cladding, window frames

These categories focus attention on the dominant lifecycle impacts of different products and allow a range of sustainable design and production choices to be identified and priority interventions to drive better environmental outcomes.

In mapping the priority interventions, the research emphasises that there will be no silver bullet. A range of measures across four areas – command & control, technical, economic and communicative – are likely to be needed to incentivise more resource efficient design and use of plastics products, and to support greater capture and recycling of these products at end of life. Developing a smart Extender Producer Responsibility framework, a clear strategy for bioplastics, and support for innovation and infrastructure development are among the measures that are proposed. The mapping also highlights a number of potential overlaps and tensions that might occur between the various interventions.

The report also acknowledges that there is much happening in this space, from Government plans to consult on DRS to major supply chain commitments like the UK Plastics Pact and unilateral action by brands looking to demonstrate that they are taking the problem of plastic waste seriously. It is therefore a snapshot in time and The UK Plastics Pact, for example, is already committed to exploring a number of the challenges and interventions discussed in the report as part of its work.

Dr Colin Church, chief executive of CIWM, said:

“The nation has to find a way to address public concerns about marine plastic pollution whilst at the same time recognising the role of plastics in modern society. This report helps to clarify some of the decisions we need to make in the forthcoming Resources & Waste Strategy.”

Ray Georgeson, chief executive of the Resource Association, said:

“The report is an important contribution to the necessary debate on the future of plastics. I welcome the novel use-based approach, which graphically illustrates the complexities we face.”

Jakob Rindegren, Recycling Policy Advisor at ESA, said:

“The ongoing debate on plastics has given significant momentum to interventions that seemed unthinkable only a year ago. However, while maintaining this momentum we need evidence-based decision making in this highly complex area. This report contributes to the evidence and reinforces ESA’s view that producer responsibility and demand for materials are essential components that should be at the heart of the upcoming Resources & Waste Strategy.”

Peter Maddox, Director at WRAP UK, said:

“The UK Plastics Pact is all about working together in partnership with everyone in the supply chain to develop a circular plastics economy in the UK and stop leakage of plastic packaging into the environment. So I welcome the core recommendations from this report that we will need a range of measures to achieve the ambition of zero plastics waste in the economy by 2042.”

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