

PRESS RELEASE

EUBP criticises biased interpretation of EEA study on biodegradable and compostable plastics: consumers do understand value and proper end-of-life of compostable plastics

Berlin, 9 September 2020 – In response to the new report “Biodegradable and compostable plastics – challenges and opportunities” by the European Environment Agency (EEA), European Bioplastics (EUBP) highlights the need to acknowledge successful precedents in the deployment of these innovative materials in collaboration with a receptive community of consumers. Unfortunately, several media outlets made use of a biased interpretation of the report to draw a distorted picture of biodegradable and compostable plastics.

François de Bie, Chairman of EUBP, stated “In several respects, the EEA report is laudable in its objectives to provide information about the types of biodegradable products available, their labelling and their properties. It also accurately highlights the need to raise awareness about the different packaging solutions to ensure proper sorting and collection of waste”. In terms of additional benefits, the EEA correctly notes that contamination with conventional plastics is an increasing challenge for compost quality and emphasises that substituting conventional plastics with certified compostable plastics can significantly help in reducing this risk. Indeed, compostable plastics are essential in this respect of recovery and recycling, since no other economically viable solutions will be available for food-contaminated plastics in the near future.

The report correctly highlights that using compostable plastic bags increases the capture rate of food waste, since consumers find them convenient and practical to use. Many municipalities and waste collectors are, therefore, already recommending or requiring the use of certified compostable plastic bags for collecting bio-waste. In agriculture, biodegradable mulch films, which help by contributing towards sustainable farming practices, are also identified as a key solution in avoiding long-term plastic accumulation in soil.

However, on the consumer side the report also casts doubt around the potential for understanding how and where bioplastics should be dealt with when it comes to end-of-life options. It neglects to reflect that all biodegradable plastics, with the exception of agricultural mulch films which are recycled in situ, are clearly intended for organic recycling. Whilst opponents of bioplastics often claim that consumers will be unable to differentiate between bioplastics intended for home or industrial composting, the evidence points to the contrary where clear labelling, communication and effective sorting are put in place.¹ Unfortunately, however, media coverage almost exclusively focused on this single aspect. In contrast, EEA’s related assessment, that there is no evidence supporting the fear that consumers might misunderstand biodegradability or compostability claims as a ‘license to litter’, was ignored.

¹ E.g. in the Milan area the collection of biowaste using compostable plastics is mandatory since 2012. In particular, Italy has demonstrated that compostable plastics are efficiently collected and recycled in composting facilities, as recently reported by the Italian Composting Consortium (in Italian: https://www.compost.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/CS-4-Studio-CIC-COREPLA-2020_-raddoppiano-le-bioplastiche-compostabili-nella-raccolta-dell%E2%80%99organico-5.pdf; https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jd9zUI6Tu0XvV_jUzbdqhlIs2s8KX4MV/view).

Although mechanical recycling provides solutions for certain applications, it is far from a “one size fits all” answer to the question of how to ensure that plastics fulfil their potential in a circular economy. In fact, the reality is more complex with multiple solutions needed in order to enable resource efficiency, as outlined in a recent report from Systemiq and the Pew Charitable Trust.² In this respect, organic recycling represents unparalleled potential for diverting unavoidable food waste from landfill, facilitating the shift towards a circular economy and bringing benefits for more sustainable agriculture through the generation of high-quality compost for soil enrichment.

In order to accelerate the transition towards a greener economy, European Bioplastics calls on all relevant stakeholders to have a constructive dialogue over biodegradable and compostable plastics that is science rather than ideology based.

Additional links:

EUBP Discussion Paper, Criteria for switching products to certified compostable plastics, 2019 (https://docs.european-bioplastics.org/publications/EUBP_discussion_paper_criteria-for-compostable-plastics_products.pdf)

About European Bioplastics:

European Bioplastics (EUBP) is the European association representing the interests of the bioplastics industry along the entire value chain. Its members produce, refine and distribute bioplastics i.e. plastics that are bio-based, biodegradable, or both. More information is available at www.european-bioplastics.org

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² Pew Charitable Trust, Systemiq: Breaking the Plastic Wave, 2020 (https://www.systemiq.earth/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/BreakingThePlasticWave_MainReport.pdf).