European countries are preparing to implement a brand new set of waste and recycling laws, following the conclusion of negotiations on the circular economy package in December. But there is more ahead, with the Plastics Strategy unveiled by the European Commission only one month later.

In this Special Report, EURACTIV takes stock of the latest developments and looks at what’s coming next when it comes to packaging waste and recycling laws.
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Plastic has become increasingly unpopular with the public. But life without it might look very different.

Last month, as executives from Europe’s plastic manufacturing sector met for a new year reception at the top of The Hotel in Brussels, the winds of change were in the air. As they gazed over the Brussels skyline, the chatter was of an industry in flux. And there was a mix of excitement and trepidation in the air.

Just a week earlier, the European Commission had unveiled its plastics strategy – a plan to phase out the manufacture of single-use plastics and make all plastic reusable or recyclable by 2030.

The new policy comes in response to growing public pressure on policymakers and companies to do something about plastic waste. For some in the plastics industry, it has felt like the world is turning against them.

But speaking at the event, Daniel Calleja Crespo, director-general of the Commission’s environment department, sought to reassure any jittery nerves. The EU is not declaring war on plastic – it is going to work with the industry to make the plastics value chain more circular.

“We all know that plastics is a success story,” he told the crowd. “It’s one of the most successful materials, it’s everywhere in our daily lives, you see it all over the place. It provides a lot of services to consumers. And yet we have to face the task of how can we make plastics more circular.”

He then addressed the other elephant in the room – China’s decision to ban imports of plastic waste for recycling from 1 January this year. Until now, China has been recycling about half of the world’s plastic products.

But Beijing unexpectedly announced in July that it was placing a ban on such imports, giving the world’s recycling market little time to adjust. With the largest export market suddenly unavailable, there are now
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backups of plastic waste throughout Europe, particularly in Germany, Ireland and the UK.

The Commission sees this crisis as an opportunity. “This is the best news for Europe,” Crespo said. “Why? Because now we have no choice but to develop more recycling, to work more on eco-design and to find more sustainable solutions to meet this challenge.”

Environmental campaigners have also been stressing this. Emma Priestland, an environmental campaigner with the group Seas at Risk, says the timing is key because there will only be a short window created by the Chinese decision in which systemic change is not only possible, but required.

“There’s a very real risk that all of that waste instead of going to China will instead go to another country,” she says. “Now is the real time that we can push this momentum through.”

Beijing’s decision, coupled with a global pushback against plastics, make this an uncertain time for all parts of the plastics value chain.

PLASTIC PRESSURE

When the European Commission unveiled its long-awaited strategy to reduce plastic waste last month, one quote seemed to stick in peoples’ minds.

“If we don’t change the way we produce and use plastics, there will be more plastics than fish in our oceans by 2050,” Frans Timmermans, the Commission first vice-president, told a press conference. “The only long-term solution is to reduce plastic waste by recycling and reusing more.”

That statistic, from a 2016 Ellen MacArthur Foundation report, has been widely reported. After years of growing public concern, 2018 is the year that policymakers appear set to respond in a major way.

This year’s World Environment Day on 5 June will be devoted to plastics pollution. Four days later, Canada will host this year’s G7 summit and devote the meeting to tackling plastic waste, hoping to convince the other wealthy nations to commit to a zero plastics waste goal.

Members of the United Nations signed up to a loose version of this goal at a summit in Nairobi in December. And in October, companies meeting at the Our Oceans conference in Malta committed to provide funding to help retrieve plastic waste from the ocean.

In the days following the Commission’s policy, and a similar but far less ambitious strategy from the British government one week earlier, a number of retailers announced new plans to change their use of plastics.

One day after the Commission put forward its strategy, McDonalds announced that all of its packaging will come from sustainable sources by 2025 – up from half today. Within seven years, all of the 37,000 McDonalds restaurants in the world will recycle packaging – up from just 10% today.

A few days later Danone, the French company which produces the Evian water brand, announced that all of its plastic bottles will come from 100 percent recycled plastic by 2025. British grocery chain Iceland has promised to reduce plastic packaging from its own branded products, and Costa Coffee has promised to remove plastic drinking straws from its stores this year. All of these companies have cited demand from their customers as the reason for making the change.

“Public concern about plastics pollution has been growing over recent years,” says Delphine Lévi Alvarès, coordinator of the Rethink Plastic Alliance, a group of NGOs working to reduce plastic use. “Plastic pollution is visible for people, and it touches their heart because it’s harming marine creatures and polluting the places where they go on holiday.

It’s a visible pollution, compared to climate change and CO2 emissions which, especially in Western countries, people don’t see right away the effect on their lives”.

A WORLD WITHOUT PLASTICS?

Plastics manufacturers, along with retailers and recyclers, have welcomed the Commission’s strategy. Karl Foerster, PlasticEurope’s executive director, says the industry understands that it has a role to play in making sure plastics are made to be recyclable as possible – even if it took a while to get there.

“We want the rate of recycling of plastics to increase significantly,” he says. “Three years ago I couldn’t have said that, because not all members would have agreed with that statement. That has already changed the relationship with recyclers, because it’s not a conflictual situation in terms of business. We have improved that relationship very much.”

“It was a difficult process,” he adds. “You see also over that time changes in corporate strategies of our members. But it was important to us that the entire industry is committed to it and thinking alike. It doesn’t help us if we have three companies that say great, and others that say this is the end of our life.”

Foerster says he doesn’t mind the intense scrutiny plastics is under at the moment. “We are happy that plastics is in the spotlight right now, because it also makes people more aware of the benefits, and why we use plastics. You always have to ask, what’s the alternative?”

A study published last year by the consultancy Trucost assessed some of the alternatives, in an attempt to measure the overall environmental and sustainability cost of using plastics instead of alternative materials. It

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looked not only at waste but also at water consumption, CO2 emissions and air pollution.

The study found that replacing plastics in consumer products and packaging with a mix of alternative materials such as glass and paper would increase environmental costs from $139 billion to $533 billion annually. The major cause for the difference is the ease of production and lightweight nature of plastics. Much larger quantities of alternative materials are needed to fulfil the same purposes as plastics.

Environmental campaigners, however, don’t buy this argument. Levi Alvares notes that what counts is whether products are reused and recycled, and this is easier to do with glass and paper. Much of the plastic packaging that companies use is wholly unnecessary and needs no alternative. And in the case of plastic cutlery, washable reusable materials are better in any lifecycle analysis.

“They’ve been very present in the debate with this lifecycle assessment,” she says. “The flexible plastics industry is, for instance, emphasizing lifetime extension for meat, by preserving it longer. But it’s not recyclable.”

Foerster says there is no reason environmental campaigners and the industry need to be ideological enemies in this transition. “We have always said the worst thing we can do with plastic waste is to landfill it, because this is a resource for us,” he says. “We need to see waste not as waste. It only becomes waste when it’s wasted. As long as we use it as a resource – recycle it, reuse it or recover the energy from it, then we have a benefit from it.”

The association has set itself a less ambitious timeline for making plastics reusable or recyclable: 60% by 2030. They want all plastics to be reusable, recycleable or used for energy recovery by 2040.

But while interests may align when it comes to promoting plastics recycling, the idea of decreasing the use of plastics altogether is likely to continue to be resisted by the industry.

As the plastics strategy works through the EU legislative process over the coming year, this is likely to be where the main battles are fought. Should the EU focus its efforts in increasing recycling, or in phasing out the use of plastics?
The EU is losing 95% of the value of the plastics it produces. But the European Commission has a strategy to make plastic packaging more sustainable, both environmentally and economically.

Last month, the Commission put forward one of the most eagerly anticipated environmental files of this term.

The plastics strategy is the culmination of years of data-gathering and preliminary measures. It was first envisioned by the circular economy action plan in 2015 which came along with a ban on free plastic bags.

Now the Commission is ready to push ahead with the full plan, with a headline goal of making all plastics produced in the EU reusable or recyclable by 2030.

The importance attached to the strategy was reflected in who announced it. Although the file belongs to Environment Commissioner Karmenu Vella, its announcement was made by the Commission’s two “top guns”, as chief spokesperson Margaritis Schinas described them. Vice Presidents Frans Timmermans and Jyrki Katainen gave a high profile press conference and then made the rounds on European broadcasters including the BBC.

Timmermans says the EU has to act to prevent plastic marine litter. As part of the strategy, the EU will update port reception facility rules to require fishing vessels to deposit any waste accidentally gathered at sea at a port rather than dumping it back in the ocean.

Katainen, the EU’s vice president for growth and investment, has focused on treating the waste at source, highlighting the environmental and economic benefits of increased recycling.

“Every year Europeans generate 25 million tonnes of plastic waste, but less than 30% is collected for recycling,” he told EURACTIV. “Some 95% of the value of plastic packaging is lost from the economy every year. How can

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we keep the value in the market by recycling?”

**CHANGING THE WAY PLASTICS ARE MADE**

The strategy’s headline 2030 goal will mean plastics manufacturers will need to work closely with recyclers to ensure that what they produce is recyclable. And both will have to work with local and national governments to ensure that plastic waste is collected.

PlasticsEurope, the Brussels-based industry body representing plastics manufacturers, has stepped up its partnerships with recyclers. “This will require cooperation from many stakeholders,” Karl Foerster, the group’s executive director, told EURACTIV. He says the increasing partnerships with recyclers are working because “it’s not a conflictual situation in terms of business.”

PlasticsEurope has broadly welcomed the strategy but it has set itself a lower voluntary target – making 60% of plastics reusable or recyclable by 2030, with a 2040 target of making all plastics renewable, recyclable, or used for energy recovery.

The key question is how to incentivise these partnerships. Right now virgin plastics are cheaper to produce than recycled plastics, so manufacturers are gravitating toward them. Most of the plastic waste is shipped to recyclers in other countries, particularly China, where there is more incentive.

China has banned such imports from 1 January this year, causing a huge build-up at European collection points. The plastics waste industry now has a major economic incentive to find willing clients to recycle and reuse – the question is how to incentivise the purchasing end.

The Commission is considering a variety of tools and may come out with proposals for incentives next year. “We are looking at different types of fiscal incentives,” says Katainen. Some have called for recyclers to be given credits in EU emissions trading as a motivator.

**PLASTICS TAX**

One idea is setting a tax on plastics. This idea was not considered in the consultations, but was suddenly championed by budget commissioner Gunther Oettinger shortly before the strategy was published, as a way to generate additional EU revenue while reducing plastic use.

In the end, his fellow commissioners agreed to insert a line in the strategy saying the idea would be considered. But stakeholders are sceptical that this idea will ever come to light.

“In general we’re really in favour of financial instruments to drive recycling,” says Delphine Lévi Alvarès, coordinator of the Rethink Plastic Alliance, a coalition of environmental NGOs. “But for now we don’t have much information on how this tax could be designed, or on which level of the value chain it would be applied. We’ve been asking for information but so far it’s really blurry.”

She notes that obligatory charges on plastic bags have been successful in driving consumer behaviour away from single-use plastics.

“The plastics tax has not been considered in any of the documents, because it came out of the sky,” says Foerster. “I personally do not think that is the right approach because you’re taxing resource efficiency. In many cases plastics increase overall resource efficiency, and to tax that could backfire, which could be contradictory to the objectives of the circular economy.”

“I think the motivation came from how you cover future budget deficits due to Brexit, and it will probably be one of thousands of ideas on how to achieve that,” he adds.

**SINGLE-USE PLASTICS**

In its strategy, the Commission has promised to look into the issue of single-use plastics, with the possibility of eventually setting a ban or a charge as is now possible for plastic bags. These plastics, such as straws, crisps packets, sanitary towels, drink bottles, cigarette butts, cups and cutlery are what is most frequently found on beaches and in oceans – representing half of all marine litter.

“These things have no place in the circular economy, most of the time they cannot be recycled,” says Emma Priestland, an environmental campaigner with the group Seas at Risk. “We can ban them, or we could do simple material swaps.”

A number of companies have come forward recently with pledges to reduce their use of these plastics. For instance, Costa Coffee has promised to remove plastic straws from its stores this year.

But Foerster says banning all single use plastics could have unintended consequences. “The term single use is not defined, and everybody has something different in mind,” he says. “There’s a difference between straws and items in a hospital, where you want single use. You also might want this in food preparation, for hygienic reasons. Is the health of the human being a higher objective than waste?”

**PRODUCER RESPONSIBILITY**

The strategy also previews changes to what producers, including food and drink makers, will be responsible for. The Commission is preparing a revision of the Waste Framework Directive, which is expected to modulate the fees member states can require food producers to pay toward the collection and recycling of the plastic packaging they use.

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The EU’s extended producer responsibility framework was first introduced 20 years ago, and since then the majority of member states have introduced EPR for packaging. But the form of implementation varies from one country to the next. As part of the strategy, the Commission will come forward with guidance for member states to better harmonise the approaches.

Patricia Lopez, manager for environmental affairs at industry association FoodDrinkEurope, says her sector welcomes the strategy and the clarification it will provide. “We would like to provide a constructive support for the commission to shape this initiative coming up,” she told EURACTIV. “We are there more to support, with our experience, and try to get the best outcome of it all.”

EUROPEN, an association which represents the packaging supply chain, has stressed that this revision should be done without introducing barriers to the internal market.

MICROPLASTICS

Perhaps the biggest immediate policy change in the strategy is the remit extension of the EU’s Regulation on Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH) to microplastics – particles smaller than 5 mm.

“The problem with microplastics is it’s difficult to catch them,” says Priestland. “You don’t know where they are, but they’re still able to cause harm. The beaches and sediments at the bottom of the ocean are just full of microplastics. The thing most recognizable to normal people are the little plastics in shower scrubs.”

Cosmetics also contain many microplastics. Sometimes they are used intentionally in products, sometimes they are generated through the breakdown of larger plastic pieces and through the wear and tear of products. Those that are added intentionally would have to be registered under REACH for the first time. For those that are generated, the Commission is examining options such as labelling and minimum requirements for product design and durability.

“This is a big change, previously it was just the additives in the plastics that would go through REACH,” says Priestland. But she adds that this announcement needs to be followed up with additional staff and resources for the European Chemicals Agency in Helsinki to process the microplastics.

GLOBAL COORDINATION

Of course, the marine litter problem is a global one. Will the EU action really make a difference?

The strategy notes that the EU is developing coordinated responses through the UN Global Partnership on Marine Litter, and through G7 and G20 initiatives. The EU was instrumental in getting the United Nations Environmental Assembly to agree a series of international commitments on marine litter in December, as well as at the EU-led Our Ocean summit in Malta in October.

Katainen adds that if the EU strategy is successful, it will be emulated by the rest of the world. “Europe could easily be a good testbed for new ways to regulate the plastic market to become more sustainable, more innovative and profitable,” he told EURACTIV.

But that will all depend on whether the bold vision outlined in the plastics strategy is followed up by the next college of commissioners, set to take office next year.
Without oversight, the implementation of the circular economy package entails a huge risk of Member States going into different directions and introducing barriers to the internal market, warns Virginia Janssens.

Virginia Janssens is Managing Director at EUROPEN, the European Organisation for packaging and the Environment.

After years of discussion, compromises and trade-offs reflecting many underlying interests, we are now awaiting the officially approved texts of the EU’s Circular Economy Package (CEP). The packaging supply chain, represented by EUROPEN, has always been a supporter of the European Commission’s ambitions for growth and competitiveness as key drivers to transition towards a low-carbon Circular Economy. The Commission has recently been praised globally for the publication of its EU Plastics Strategy as part of the CEP Action Plan.

Those close to the CEP developments may know that EUROPEN, together with 129 other EU and national trade associations, has been campaigning for retaining the Internal Market as the sole legal base for the EU’s Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (PPWD).

While we are relieved that the EU

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institutions came to an agreement in support of this, there is no rest for the wicked. We are preparing for lots of secondary legislation and for the CEP implementation phase at national level. In parallel, we are getting our collective heads around the implications of the Plastics Strategy and more to come.

All of these developments at EU and national level need to be underpinned by the Internal Market, to preserve harmonisation across the EU member states. Yes, here we are again. It is the same Internal Market mantra, but this time even more important and fragile than ever before. Without EU harmonisation, some measures suggested by the Commission will jeopardise the Internal Market.

Ahead of the CEP’s formal adoption, the Commission already made clear it intends to open up the PPWD again for legal review. Its specific goal is to overhaul the Essential Requirements (ER) in the PPWD to drive recyclability and the uptake of recycled material. In principle, EUROGEN supports a review of the ER. One reason is to ensure that these ER continue to effectively allow packaged goods to enter the entire EU Internal market.

In the Plastic Strategy, the Commission suggests several interventions to improve the recyclability and recycling rate of plastic packaging specifically. Such measures are not necessarily limited to plastics, but might impact all materials, hence all packaging and therefore all packaged goods.

It is rightly acknowledged that “single-use” packaging is required in certain situations to guarantee food hygiene and the health and safety of consumers. Member States are asked to take this into account when developing prevention and reduction measures for packaging. These kind of derogations demonstrate that one size fits all policy tools are difficult for such a diversity of packaging solutions and supply chains for such a wide diversity of products that require different functionalities.

For instance, decreasing the use of plastic bags might be easier than for other packaging types that are intrinsically connected with the product. Moreover, these types of policy solutions may quickly lead to Internal Market distortions.

All these suggestions to Member States should be accompanied by a clear context and a common platform to elaborate on these policy recommendations. Without this oversight, the CEP implementation entails a huge risk of Member States going into different directions and introducing barriers that are not just based on environmental considerations. It is the very reason why the Internal Market was introduced as the sole legal base for the PPWD in the first place, back in 1994. Given the ambition for Europe to remain competitive towards a Circular Economy, the EU’s Internal Market is more needed than ever before.

The Internal Market has brought huge prosperity to European citizens and consumers and is one of the few undisputed EU assets. Whether environmentally driven or prompted by other reasons, policy measures that are not EU-harmonised will jeopardise the scale and ease of doing business to be successful. The same goes for developing and applying environmental innovations.

We can’t stress enough that when addressing packaging, regardless of its material, we are addressing the quasi totality of all packaged goods. To be fully supported and delivered, the transition into a Circular Economy that is truly European, therefore needs to be embedded in a strong Internal Market.
The European Commission is looking at different types of fiscal incentives to increase demand for recycled plastics, which are currently more costly than virgin materials, Jyrki Katainen told EURACTIV in an interview.

Jyrki Katainen is the European Commission’s Vice-President for growth and investment. He spoke to EURACTIV’s Dave Keating.

Katainen: ‘We need to change the fundamentals of the plastics market’

By Dave Keating | EURACTIV.com

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS:

- All plastic packaging should be designed to be recyclable by 2030.
- EU-wide regulation needed to set standards for plastic packages.
- The Commission is looking into a broad range of incentives to increase demand for recycled plastics, including taxation.
- After plastic bags, the EU executive is also looking at the next single-use plastic items that should be restricted.

The Commission has made a very high-profile push for its plastics strategy. Why do we need a plastics strategy now?

There are several reasons. The first is pragmatic. We have done a very thorough analysis on how to address the plastic waste issue. We were collecting data and now we’re ready.

Plastic is a good material, it’s light and it’s cheap and it’s part of our society, and in certain cases plastics can add clear environmental value, like in lightweighting of transport.

But plastics have also been the basis of a throwaway linear economy for the past 50 years, and it’s not sustainable any more. We want to reduce the amount of plastic, and also to look at how we could get more value from plastic waste.

Every year Europeans generate some 25 million tonnes of plastic waste, but less than 30% is collected for recycling. Some 95% of the value of plastic packaging is lost from the...
economy every year. We are asking, how can we keep the value in the market by recycling?

The strategy follows China’s decision to stop importing plastic from Europe to be recycled from 1 January, which has caused a build-up for European recyclers who now don’t know where to send the waste. What should be the EU response to the Chinese ban, in the short and long term?

In the short term it’s quite challenging, but we see this as a positive challenge for us. Sending our waste to other countries is a stupid thing to do. We can keep materials here and try to find relatively quickly sustainable long-term solutions.

It should not be seen as waste in its traditional meaning, it should be seen as a secondary raw material which has value. But I know that all the existing plastic waste cannot be recycled because there are too many different types of plastics.

So one of our aims is to regulate the quality of plastic better than how we have done so far.

Part of the reason for the exports was that right now virgin plastics are cheaper to produce than recycled plastics in Europe, so manufacturers have not had incentives to use them. What kind of policies should be put in place to make recycled materials cheaper than virgin materials? Should plastics be taxed?

We can use our regulatory power. Currently the demand for high-quality recycled plastics remains very weak. That’s why one can say our single market is missing these two parts – the market for plastic packaging waste and for recycled plastic.

All plastic packaging should be designed to be recyclable by 2030.

Work is now starting on [revising] the legal requirements for placing plastic packaging on the market. It’s not rocket science, but it’s not something you can do overnight either.

Recycling plastics is rather challenging. For each recycling stream the technical challenges are different. What we call plastic is actually a wide range of chemical mixtures, molecules that are difficult to disentangle. That’s why we need EU-wide regulation that sets standards for plastic packages.

Once we have this regulation in place, it will create clear incentives on what material can be used. It will make collection of plastic waste easier. We need to change the fundamentals of the plastics market. We need to make sure that the circular economy is as profitable as the current linear economy.

We are looking at different types of fiscal incentives. I can’t promise yet if we can find well-functioning incentives. Some people have talked about a plastic tax, for instance. But there are plenty of issues which must be clarified. Who should pay the tax – the plastic producer, the consumer, or both?

One could ask whether it would make more sense to introduce an EU-wide oil tax, because then the tax base would be even broader. But like most taxes, they are in the hands of member states, and it might be very difficult to get these kinds of proposals through, it would need unanimity in the Council.

Sometimes it’s very easy to introduce these taxes or charges, but the implementation is more difficult. But I don’t exclude any of these ideas.

Many companies like Danone, McDonald’s and Coca-Cola have announced their own private initiatives to lessen plastic waste, responding to public demand. How can these work as part of the strategy? Will companies’ focus on recycling alone be enough to solve the problem?

The voluntary commitments are very important. And if we manage to empower consumers to demand less plastics, it would be a very powerful tool.

We have had eco-design legislation and energy labelling legislation in place, and this has enabled consumer choice when they are buying things like refrigerators. There the consumers’ choices have helped the development of energy efficiency, it’s been a symbiotic relationship and led to significant energy savings.

The same thing could happen with plastics. That’s why the commission is looking at ways to empower consumers in the same manner.

Recycling alone is not enough however. We need to reduce the amount of plastic or at least the growth of plastic consumption. So that’s why, for instance, we are exploring opportunities how to further build on the positive experience with the single use plastic bag directive.

We are identifying what should be the other single use plastic items that should be restricted. This has a big impact on marine littering.

We need restrictions like this, but we cannot declare an entire war against plastics because it has also benefits – it can replace heavier materials, so the CO2 costs are lower.
The plastics industry is changing fast, and the way our food and products are packaged could look totally different in just a few years.

Plastic: it’s all around us, and sometimes it can feel like we’re drowning in it. We know it can be recycled, but somehow so much of it seems to end up in landfill, on the street and in the oceans. The sight of a plastic bottle in a garbage can rather than a recycling bin can be enormously frustrating.

So why isn’t more plastic being recycled?

There are a variety of reasons. Collection schemes remain under-resourced, and consumers remain largely uninformed on how to recycle properly. Recycled plastics are still more expensive to use than virgin plastics, making the economic incentive for collection and recycling less compelling.

But perhaps the most beguiling problem is the huge variety of types of plastics, complicating bulk recycling schemes.

Improving this situation will involve the entire value chain, from plastics producers to product manufacturers to retailers to consumers to collectors to recyclers, and back again.

“We need to change the fundamentals of the plastics market,” says Jyrki Katainen, vice president of the European Commission, which has recently unveiled a strategy to increase plastics recycling. This will require new collection methods and new technologies.

**THE FUTURE OF PRODUCTION**

Many types of plastic are not recyclable, or difficult to recycle, because of the way they are made. Black plastic, for instance, can’t be recycled because of the dyes. The Commission’s strategy has set a goal of making all plastics reusable and recyclable by 2030.

The most recyclable plastics are PETE and HDPE. The hardest plastics to recycle are thin plastics like paper bags, and polystyrene foam.

Emma Priestland from environmental campaign group Seas at Risk says changing the way plastics are designed is key, because the greatest recycling scheme in the world will be of no use if most of the plastic we use can’t be recycled.

“We really have to look back at the design phase and the choices made there,” she says.

But the producers need to be motivated to make the change. That’s why a number of retailers and food producers have come forward with pledges to only use recyclable plastic.

Last month Coca-Cola announced

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its World Without Waste initiative, with a commitment to use only recyclable plastic in its bottles by 2025. By 2030, an average of 50% of Coca-Cola bottles will be made from recycled content. Danone, the French company which produces the Evian water brand, also announced last month that all of its plastic bottles will come from recycled plastic by 2025.

Patricia Lopez, manager for environmental affairs at industry association FoodDrinkEurope, says the plastics strategy is “an opportunity for our businesses to assess different options for packaging”.

“We acknowledge we have a share of the responsibility, in regards to littering of materials that we put in the market, and that’s why our members are already taking actions to try to look for measures and options to reduce the problem of packaging,” she says.

One emerging alternative to traditional plastic is bioplastics. These are made from sustainable sources rather than from fossil fuels, and some of them can naturally biodegrade in the environment. Some policymakers are pushing for increased use. Italy has put a law in place requiring all plastic bags to be bio-based, and Italian MEP Simona Bonafe wants the EU to remove any barriers to its use.

But environmental groups have remained sceptical about bioplastics. “We do not support swapping conventional plastic to bioplastic,” says Priestand. “Is this going to fuel deforestation, or displace food?”

The difficulty is that these bioplastic bags need to be disposed of properly, says Karl Foerster, executive director of PlasticsEurope, the industry association of plastics producers.

“They’re not biodegradable in 10 seconds, they need time,” Foerster says. “We have lots of good solutions, but they need an infrastructure. In Italy, people carry the biodegradable grocery bags home, then they use them for organic waste. Those are separately collected and go into composting plants. But if you throw it in the park or in the sea, that causes problems”.

The Commission’s strategy is rather lukewarm on bioplastics. “Bio-based plastics have their place on the market, but it’s not always clear if the production of bioplastics is more sustainable than plastics based on fossil fuels,” Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen told EURACTIV.

“Also if consumers are mixing bio-based plastics with oil-based plastics the recyclability becomes more difficult. We need to raise consumer awareness of the benefits and disadvantages of bio-based plastics.”

**THE FUTURE OF COLLECTION**

Most countries in the EU have some kind of plastics recycling scheme, but they differ across the bloc. In Germany, a 25 euro cent deposit fee is charged for most, but not all, plastics. Consumers get their deposit back by bringing the empty bottles to a store and depositing them in a machine. That’s the carrot approach. Belgium uses a stick approach, requiring households to sort plastic separately for collection and fining them if they don’t do it.

Foerster says it’s only natural that these schemes are tailored to local specificities. “We need an approach that takes into account local situations – we can’t have the same approach all across Europe.”

But there are concerns that many countries are moving far too slowly in setting up collection schemes. Only 30% of plastic waste is collected for recycling today across the EU. While this is higher than the global rate of 14%, but still nowhere near what could be done.

Companies have come forward with plans to help speed this along, partly through funding programs. Coca-Cola’s World Without Waste initiative contains a commitment to collect and recycle a bottle or can for every one the company sells worldwide by 2030. The company isn’t in a position to collect the bottles itself, so it will invest marketing dollars and skills to help people understand what, how and where to recycle. It will also support collection of packaging from other companies.

**THE FUTURE OF RECYCLING**

There are also technical advances in recycling that can make the process more efficient. There are two types of recycling – mechanical and chemical. Which method is chosen depends on the type of waste and its chemical composition.

Foerster says both approaches are needed going forward, and chemical recycling is a particular area where research and development can deliver efficiency.

“If we think the future is only mechanical recycling, that is not feasible,” he says. “Solutions are only sustainable solutions as long as they are ecologically sound and also financially sound.”

However Priestland says she is sceptical of technical solutions that promise to solve the plastics problem. “I’m very wary of technological fixes for our plastic problem – we have to reduce the amount of plastic use, we can’t just keep using the same amount of plastic but make it more innovative,” she says.

“We want the emphasis to be on reusable packaging rather than recyclable. Recycling is difficult and extremely energy intensive.”

In the end, the solution to the plastics problem will require many different initiatives throughout the value chain, working together. The risk going forward is that one part of the chain might be neglected. Improving only one part of the process will do no good.
The Coca-Cola Company’s Ulrike Sapiro introduces the company’s new global packaging vision which aims to help tackle the world’s packaging problem by investing in the planet and its packaging with some ambitious goals in material recyclability and recycling.

Read more on The Coca-Cola Company’s official website: http://www.coca-colacompany.com/stories/world-without-waste