Packaging: The fibre edition
Industries involved in forestry, pulp, paper, board and carton production have touted their green credentials, saying they are the only ones to propose packaging that is truly renewable as well as recyclable.

As the European Commission prepares to revise its packaging and packaging waste directive, EURACTIV looks at what makes fibre packaging different from metals or plastic.
Fibre packaging chair: ‘We are looking to keep fossils in the ground’ 4

Recycling cannot meet 100% of demand for packaging, EU official cautions 7
Interests of cartonboard, corrugated board, and other wood fibre-based packaging are campaigning to get the renewability and recyclability of their product recognised under EU law. They also warn against EU plans to introduce mandatory recycled content targets for new products, saying this could “disrupt a system that is already working very effectively”.

Mike Turner is the managing director of ECMA, the European Carton Makers Association. He is also the chair of Fibre Packaging Europe (FPE), an informal coalition of eight trade associations representing industries involved in forestry, pulp, paper, board and carton production and recycling from across Europe.


Interview highlights

- In contrast to metal and plastic, fibre-based packaging is renewable and the industry would like to see this recognised in EU legislation, Turner says;
- Fibre packaging industry aims to reach a 90% recycling rate by 2030, by focusing on higher...
collection and improving the recyclability of multi-layered packaging like beverage cartons;
• That said, the industry “would urge against policymakers legislating to reduce the range of packaging formats” as a way to improve recyclability, Turner warns;
• 82% of fibre packaging is already being recycled today and introducing mandatory targets for recycled content would “disrupt a system that is already working very effectively,” he argues;
• Industry studies show that single-use paper packaging has a lower environmental footprint than re-usable packaging, which needs to be collected and washed before it is placed back on the market;
• “Fibre-based packaging is not re-usable, it’s a highly recyclable format,” he says.

In contrast to metals or plastics that are being used in packaging, paper and board are renewable materials. How can that be reflected in policy?

We are looking to keep fossils in the ground whereas fibre is renewable. So we would like to see the renewability of fibre recognised in the legislation.

But also, the fact that the high recycling rates of fibre based packaging is 82% according to the most recent published Eurostat figure. In terms of volume of packaging, more fibre is recycled than all other packaging formats combined.

How can you increase those rates? Is it even possible?

Yes, it is. The 4evergreen alliance, which represents the whole value chain, is working together to increase the recycling rates of fibre packaging. The aspiration is to reach a 90% recycling rate by 2030.

This can be done by focusing on some of the more demanding packaging formats to recycle, for example fibre packaging that has a plastic layer for food safety. That layer of plastic performs a vital food safety function. And what we’re aiming for is to increase the recycling rate of those.

Another area of legislation that we are looking into is collection. Because great recycling starts with great collection. That’s why we are calling on the European Commission to increase the convergence of collection systems across Europe.

At the moment, there are a whole range of different collection systems across EU countries. And We would like to see a convergence of collection systems, with paper being collected as a separate item.

There is a high economic demand for fibre packaging, a lot of people want to recycle it. And we would like to see a better sorted waste stream so that the material is uniform regardless of where it is collected in Europe.

You spoke about the inner lining of beverage cartons, which contain a layer of plastic for food preservation. How can the recyclability of this type of packaging be improved? Is it through eco design?

It’s already recyclable, they already can be recycled in standard recycling mills. It’s already happening today.

What we are asking policymakers is to ensure greater convergence of collection systems in order to ensure greater volumes are collected, which will make it easier to get to that material and recycle it.

Eco-design is indeed another really important factor to increase recycling rates of things like multi-layered packaging, which contain a plastic barrier to preserve food or beverage. And that means designing recyclability into the package item.

Can that still be improved?

Yes, it is being improved. The 4evergreen alliance, for example, two months ago issued design for recycling guidelines on how you can design recyclability into fibre packaging. All these things combined will help us increase the recycling rate.

The European Commission has suggested restricting choice when it comes to packaging so that there’s more standardisation in the industry and therefore more volumes of waste that can be collected at the end of life and made available for recycling, Is that something you would support as an industry?

It’s a tough one to answer. Designing recycling into packaging will indeed possibly reduce the variety of different packaging formats we have these days. But I think we would urge against policymakers legislating to reduce the range of packaging formats.

As I said already, 82% of fibre packaging is being recycled already, which is more in volume terms than all other packaging types.
combined. So we are already a very high performing system, but we want to take it higher.

In the context of the revision of the packaging and packaging waste directive, the European Commission often talks about improving the rates of reuse and recycling, for instance, with mandatory targets for recycled content going into new products. Is that something you would support as the paper packaging industry?

We wouldn’t support this for the paper or fibre packaging industry. As I have already mentioned, the recycling rate is already at a very high level, and introducing a mandatory recycled content target is going to disrupt a system that is already working very effectively.

We can see the benefits of having mandated recycled contents for other types of packaging where the recycling rate is not so high. But not in fibre packaging where we already have a really high rate of recyclability.

Coming back to the notion of renewability, the Commission likes to keep a technology neutral approach in how it regulates the packaging sector. So how could the renewability of fibre-based packaging be recognised? Is it for example in the eco-modulation of EPR fees? Or do you see other ways in which this can be recognised?

Eco-modulation is indeed a way to incentivise easy-to-recycle packaging formats and penalise more challenging packaging formats. I think that will naturally move the industry towards easier-to-recycle and more renewable types of packaging. So yes, I think eco-modulation of EPR fees is one of ways of achieving this.

One of the Commission’s key objectives in the revision of the packaging and packaging waste directive is to improve re-use as a preferable option to recycling, in line with the waste hierarchy. What are your views on this?

We recognise reuse has a place. But instead of bringing in mandated ratios for reusable packaging, we are asking the Commission to use lifecycle analysis on a case-by-case basis before deciding on whether a single-use or reusable packaging is the best option.

In many cases, single-use can be a better option. Taking single use fibre-based packaging such as that used in the quick service restaurant sector, life cycle analysis has demonstrated it has a lower environmental footprint together with significantly reduced water usage compared to reusable packaging, which needs to be collected, washed and placed back on the market.

Other LCAs have been done for single-use fibre packaging, including one recently for recyclable corrugated packaging which demonstrated it out-performs reusable formats overall on environmental indicators.

So in your view, re-use for fibre-based packaging doesn’t really make sense?

Fibre-based packaging is not re-usable, it’s a highly recyclable format. And as part of the revision of the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (PPWD), we are asking the Commission to make decisions based on lifecycle assessments. Because decisions must be based on facts, not on emotions. And when we have the facts, we can make the right decisions.

With the Ukraine war, food security is becoming an issue again. And this draws all our minds to the essential role that packaging plays in distributing food, making sure it gets safely to the consumer.

Good, fit for purpose packaging is needed more than ever before at the moment, as food supply and potential food shortages becomes an increasing issue.
Recycling cannot meet 100% of demand for packaging, EU official cautions

By Frédéric Simon | euractiv.com

Languages: Deutsch

“...We should not be under the illusion that recycling can actually provide 100% of the supplies needed,” said Gwenole Cozigou, director at the European Commission’s internal market department. [Olexandr

While the European Commission aims to encourage the use of recycled materials in its upcoming packaging law, it also recognises that recycling has its limits and cannot meet all the demand.

The generation of waste from packaging has reached record levels in the past decade, with an average of 173 kg per capita in 2017, the highest level ever, according to the European Commission.

And this is expected to continue in the coming years as growing online sales and the trend for single-use and disposable packaging catches on in Europe and globally.

To reverse this trend, the European Commission is preparing an update of the EU’s packaging and packaging waste directive (PPWD), which is expected to introduce mandatory recycled content targets for specific packaging formats like plastic bottles.

A proposal to revise the directive...
is expected in the autumn, possibly in October. And speculation is rife about the content of the new law, which the Commission is expected to transform into a regulation so that it is enforced uniformly across all 27 EU member states.

But even though recycling can improve, it also has its limits, said Gwenole Cozigou, director at the European Commission's internal market department.

While the EU executive aims to encourage the use of recycled content in new packaging, "we're also conscious that recycling and secondary raw materials cannot actually match demand," he said.

"We should not be under the illusion that recycling can actually provide 100% of the supplies needed," Cozigou told a recent event hosted by the Fibre Packaging Europe Alliance, a group bringing together industries in the paper value chain.

Fibre-based industries are already considered to be "a real champion in recycling" with an 82% recycling rate for paper packaging, Cozigou said. "So basically, you already exceed the current 75% target for recycling set by the Commission in the packaging and packaging waste directive."

Improving collection

This leaves an open question: can recycling rates be increased any further?

For paper industries, the answer is yes. Last year, a cross-value chain alliance called 4evergreen committed to reach a 90% recycling rate for fibre-based packaging by 2030.

But getting there will require setting up separate collection of paper from households all across Europe, it said. Another requirement is to improve the sorting of the recycled paper so that the recovered material meets state-of-the-art industry standards.

"For business in Europe, the consistency in the quality or grade of the material is really important," said Skye Oudemans, sustainability manager Europe at Sonoco, a global packaging firm.

"For paper and card, one of the key elements is separate collection so that it's not contaminated by waste but also it's not lost in the sortation process and ends up in the wrong category," she told participants at the event. That means also clearer information to consumers so they dispose of waste in the proper bin bag.

But even if 100% of paper was recycled, growing demand for packaging worldwide would still leave sustainability challenges to address, the industry says.

This is especially the case for the poorest countries of Asia or Africa, where large parts of the population do not have electricity or refrigerators and cannot store fresh food for more than a few days.

"When people earn an extra dollar, they spend it on packed food" because it allows them to store it, said Mats Nordlander, president of the containerboard business at SCA, a Swedish company involved in forestry, pulp, paper and biofuels production.

"Instead of waking up early to milk the goat for breakfast, they can get a pack of goat milk. And that has changed demand globally" for packed food, he said.

"It changes the lives of those families".

Beyond recycling: waste reduction and re-use

With demand for packed food growing inexorably, some are pointing to solutions beyond recycling to reduce the sector's impact on the environment.

Green campaigners say the highest priority should be to reduce waste and materials consumption upstream, before products hit supermarket shelves. This includes requirements to make packaging more lightweight and use fewer resources in the first place.

"This is what we're asking for every sector, not only for packaging," said Piotr Barczak from the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), a green group.

For Barczak, recycling can even be a distraction in the fight to reduce waste because it perpetuates the throw-away culture. "The amounts are growing because we focus only on recycling," he said at the industry event.

According to him, the next priority after waste reduction is to encourage re-use, like refillable bottles. Echoing concerns expressed by the European Commission, he lamented a "massive drop" in the use of refillable containers like glass jars and bottles over the last 20 years.

"Why is this? Because recycling broke the re-use systems," he pointed out.

Nordlander rejected this claim, saying recycling can complement re-use. "It's not either recycling or re-use – it's both."
‘Renewability’

For Nordlander, a long-term solution to address the environmental issues of packaging is to promote the use of renewable materials – like forest fibre.

Unlike metal or plastic, paper is made from a renewable resource, he remarked, saying this should be recognised in the EU’s packaging directive as one of the key drivers of sustainability.

“If we’re really serious about keeping the fossils in the ground, renewability is a fundamental issue,” he said.

Piotr Barczak agreed that renewability needs to be included among the range of attributes to consider when evaluating the sustainability of packaging.

“I would give points for renewability when it comes to EPR modulation,” Barczak said referring to Extended Producer Responsibility schemes that make packaging manufacturers pay for waste collection and recycling schemes.

“We want to break away from fossil fuels and fossil materials – absolutely. But the notion of sufficiency is also important,” he added, drawing parallels with biofuels and biomass, which can cause environmental problems related to pesticides use, land displacement, soil degradation, or biodiversity loss.

According to Barczak, sustainability points should also be given for other attributes of packaging, such as durability, non-toxic content, and recyclability. “Because even products coming from renewable sources can be non-recyclable,” he remarked.

In the European Commission too, officials recognise that renewability makes paper packaging stand out from the rest. But Cozigou said the sustainability assessment of packaging needs to consider many more factors, which makes life-cycle assessments particularly complex.

“It’s a difficult arbitration that has to be made between on the one hand the push for circularity, the fact that we want a lifecycle that is the cleanest possible, the fact that biomass needs to be encouraged versus fossil-based raw materials and also the fact that biodiversity policies must be conducted,” Cozigou said.

“We have to conduct all these policies in a coherent way, which is not always easy.”