Dutch consultation on Single Use Plastic

November 2021

The European Paper Packaging Alliance (EPPA) appreciates the opportunity to provide input to the consultation on the implementation of the Single Use Plastic Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/904) (SUPD) in the Netherlands. EPPA is a not-for-profit food and foodservice packaging association. Our priorities are to find concrete solutions to increase recycling and to reduce carbon emissions of food and foodservice packaging without compromising food safety and human health protection. EPPA is committed to working with policymakers to support these common priorities. The Alliance supports evidence-based policy making.

EPPA supports the aim of the SUPD to reduce plastic litter in the environment. EPPA aims to ensure that the SUPD is implemented in an impactful way that enables the proper recovery and recycling of single use plastic products and ensures optimal environmental outcomes. Therefore, EPPA would like to address two aspects of the proposed implementation in the Netherlands: the definition of high-quality recycling and the impact of single use vs. reusable packaging.

Definition of high-quality recycling

EPPA fully supports ensuring that single use products are recycled back into high quality end uses. This prolongs the life of the materials, reduces waste and material consumption. EPPA aims to contribute to the common goal by providing highly recyclable and renewable products with low environmental footprint. EPPA supports incentivising recycling of single use plastic products in the national implementation of the SUPD since this reduces material consumption and reduces waste. To enable reaching the recycling targets, it is important that the definition of “recyclable” packaging is clear, practical, and enforceable. The definition should focus on design for high-quality recycling and ensuring that packaging is collected, sorted and recycled into new products. The paper and board sector already incorporates eco-design to ensure that packaging is recyclable and recycled at scale.

However, the proposed definition of high-quality recycling is counterproductive. The proposed definition, defining high-quality recycling as “when collected cups and food containers are recycled in a way that the recycled material can be used again in cups and food packaging to be made,” is not a suitable definition for all materials. It is understandable that efforts should be made to retain materials in the loop as long as possible. However, since the scope of the SUPD not only encompasses fully plastic products, but also includes fibre-based packaging with a plastic coating or lining, the definition needs to account for differences in recycling processes between materials.

European Paper Packaging Alliance (EPPA)
P.O. Box 85612 • NL-2508 CH The Hague • The Netherlands
V.A.T. Number: NL860924531B01 ● Chamber of Commerce Number: 77178076
Telephone: +31 70 312 39 17
Email: mail@eppa-eu.org • Website: www.eppa-eu.org

The first issue is that recycled fibres cannot be recycled back into demanding food contact materials, like paper cups and food containers, because of consumer and food safety. There are potential challenges with recycled materials and risks of microbiological and chemical contamination. For recycled plastic, EU Regulation No 282/2008 enables the use of recycled plastic in food contact materials if it comes from a process that has been approved by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). However, fibre-based food contact materials do not have any EU specific measure and thus no legislation exists for fibre-based recycled content. All food contact materials, with or without recycled content, must comply with general European food safety requirements in Framework Regulation (EU) 1935/2004 that sets the general requirements for food contact materials and articles, and the Good Manufacturing Regulation (GMP) (EC) 2023/2006. Therefore, there are no enabling regulations to ensure the safe use of non-plastic recycled content in place. This means that the requirement for closed-loop recycling will effectively favour the continued use of fully plastic single use products, and inhibit the use of fibre-based alternatives, which is contrary to the objective of reducing single-use plastic consumption. In addition, more innovation to ensure that recycled fibres can safely be used in demanding food contact applications is needed, along with further optimisation of recycling systems to address these challenges. Product, consumer and food safety needs to be the priority.

Secondly, the Paper for Recycling market already functions well. Paper is a circular material and fibre-based packaging is highly recyclable and recycled. It enjoys a high recycling rate of 82.3% (EU27-2019).[1] In the Netherlands, the recycling rate of paper and board packaging is even higher, 91% (2019). There is economic demand for recycled paper as a secondary raw material, allowing the fibres to remain in the economy as a valuable resource and to be used for new products. According to the Confederation of European Paper Industries (CEPI), the European paper and board industry utilised 47 950 000 tonnes of Paper for Recycling in 2020.[2] The fibre in paper cups can be recycled multiple times.[3] This also means that there is a need for input of fresh fibres. The highest societal value is provided by taking the fresh fibres into end use applications with the highest safety requirements such as paper cups or containers of perishable food.

Limiting recycling options for fibre-based cups and food containers to closed loop recycling would therefore be counterproductive: it would, in fact, reduce the lifecycle of the fibres, and would not reflect how fibres are recycled in practice. Once recycled from cups and food containers, the fibres can be further recycled into other paper products, since the fibres are high-quality, desirable raw material for other end uses. The new products can themselves be further recycled and e.g. included as recycled content in containerboard or other non-food contact applications. During their lifecycle, fibres can be used in various applications, depending on the products produced at the mill where they are recycled. These are circular solutions. To reiterate: closed loop recycling does not reflect the realities of fibre-based recycling and it would disrupt the

[1] Eurostat (2019): Recycling rates of paper and cardboard packaging in the EU (27)
[2] CEPI, "CEPI Key Statistics 2020," 8 July 2021, https://www.cepi.org/key-statistics-2020/.
[3] VTT Technical Research Centre (2019): "LCA study of cups for hot drinks made of six different materials"

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otherwise well-functioning recycling system, which would require a complete overhaul to meet the requirements of this proposal. Therefore, recycled content should be used in the most suitable and economically feasible end uses.

Moreover, the proposed timeline and recycling targets are not realistic, considering the challenges with recycled content in food contact materials and the reform of the recycling infrastructure that would be needed to enable closed loop recycling. Therefore, EPPA would recommend that the definition of high-quality recycling is revised to mean recycling Paper for Recycling into new fibre-based products, which can in turn be recycled again, keeping the fibres in the loop. In addition, the proposed recycling targets should be aligned with EU legislation, to ensure aligned implementation. For fibre-based packaging this means 75% recycling rate by 2025 and 80% by 2030, set in the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/852). We believe these are ambitious targets, and a consistent approach will increase the likelihood of such targets being met within the given timeframe.

Reusable vs. single use packaging

The proposal for the implementation of the SUPD presents reusable packaging as the best alternative. Reusable packaging may appear to have a lesser environmental impact when compared to single-use packaging. However, when considering the impact across the full life cycle, reusable packaging is not always the best solution from an environmental perspective. Such packaging should not be considered as "standalone" and typically requires transport and washing, before it can be reused and enter a new use phase.

A new Life Cycle Analysis (LCA) study conducted by Ramboll for EPPA,[4] looked at the life cycle impact of fibre-based single use and reusable packaging systems in a Quick Service Restaurant environment in Europe. The study found that the fibre-based single use system had many benefits over multi-use systems. The multi-use system:

- emits 2.8 times more of CO_2 equivalent greenhouse gases
- consumes 3.4 times more fresh water
- consumes 3.3 times more metal
- produces 2.2 times more fine particles
- depletes 3.4 times more fossil-based resources
- emits 1.7 times more terrestrial acidification

[4] EPPA, "Ramboll life cycle analysis highlights the environmental benefits of single-use paper-based packaging," 2021, https://eppa-eu.org/scientific-facts/lca-studies-new.html

While the Ramboll study certainly only pertains to the set system boundaries, it challenges the assumption that reusable systems always have better environmental impacts. This means that there are instances where single use systems result in better environmental outcomes. Therefore, EPPA recommends that recyclable packaging made of renewable materials is considered to be an alternative to wholly plastic single use formats. There should be a differentiation of wholly plastic single use plastic packaging and fibre-based single use packaging that has a plastic coating or lining.

Recommendations

EPPA would recommend that:

1. The definition of high-quality recycling is revised to mean recycling Paper for Recycling into new fibre-based products, which can in turn be recycled again, keeping the fibres in the loop.
2. The proposed recycling targets are aligned with the recycling targets in the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive (Directive (EU) 2018/852).
3. Recyclable packaging made of renewable materials should be considered as an alternative to a) wholly plastic single use formats and b) reusable items, depending on the circumstances.

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