

BIR: Increasing focus on “local level” recycling

China’s “unprecedented” move to stop plastics scrap imports had “surprised the whole world”, according to Dr Steve Wong of Fukutomi Co. Ltd and the China Scrap Plastics Association.

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And in response, many recyclers had shifted their operations mainly to the South East Asian countries of Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand, he told the BIR Plastics Committee meeting in Barcelona on May 30.

However, the Malaysian government had stopped accepting applications for approval permits while the authorities in Vietnam and Thailand were clamping down on factories failing to comply with environmental regulations, leading to some closures. Other potential outlets in Asia – such as Taiwan and the Philippines – were unable to take substantial volumes.

According to BIR Dr Wong reiterated his support for greater recycling at source, noting an increasing number of examples of businesses going down this route in Europe and the USA. Plastics scrap imports into India were running at around 400,000 tonnes per year

and were therefore eclipsed by the annual 7 million tonnes that had entered China in the past, noted BIR Plastics Committee Chairman Surendra Patawari Borad of Gemini Corporation. "The plastics scrap industry in India is going to boom," he added. "I only hope it is soon."

In a report on the US market, Mr Patawari Borad drew attention to new targets established by the Plastics Division of the American Chemistry Council, including 100% of plastics packaging to be recyclable or recovered by 2030 and 100% of plastics packaging to be reused, recycled or recovered by 2040. These were "very ambitious" goals, he said, given that the plastic bottle recycling rate in the USA was currently around 30%.

The European report from Renaud Pfund of Veolia Propreté France Recycling identified increased demand from Eastern Europe for PET and HDPE bottles, leading to "quite strong" prices. Plastics recycling opportunities in the Middle East, meanwhile, would be improved if the region could offer "a long-term, predictable regulatory legal framework", according to Mahmoud Al Sharif of the UAE-based Sharif Group of Companies.

The general public had "woken up to the urgent need for action on recycling", enthused Mr Patawari Borad. Major names in the business world had been taking steps to improve their recycling performance "under pressure from consumers, customers and governments". The plastics recycling industry could look forward to "a tremendous future" but required "substantial investment", he maintained.

The guest presentation from Vincente Olmos, CEO of Sintac Recycling & Sintac Recycling Systems and Compounds of Spain, agreed that plastics had arrived at "a big moment of change", with the need to focus on recycling "at a local level" after many years in which a large proportion of scrap was dispatched to far-away destinations. Plastic products themselves would have a future only if they were eco-designed, comprised a high recycled content and followed closed-loop collection and recycling systems with full traceability.

Fellow guest speaker Markus Panhauser, COO of FMS Logistics in Germany, focused on the future of shipping and said consolidation among carriers would ultimately lead to less competition and higher freight rates.