

BIR World Recycling Convention: Plastics recyclers look to the future

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BIR Plastics Committee Chairman says he believes the longer term prospects for plastics recycling are promising.

Henk Alssema of Netherlands-based Vita Plastics and chairman of the Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) Plastics Committee said, "The alarm bells are ringing louder and louder" for plastics recyclers amid worrying economic developments and wider uncertainties. Alssema made his comments during his introductory remarks at the committee's meeting during the Bir World Recycling Convention Round-Table Sessions in Budapest, Hungary, Oct. 14-15.

While many companies have been beset by problems that include high stock levels, Alssema insisted he is "more positive" about longer term prospects for the plastics recycling sector. Many major companies are now incorporating larger quantities of recycled plastic into their products, he said, and progress has been made in plastics recycling technology, particularly in chemical recycling.

Guest speaker Rob de Ruiter, senior business developer at TNO in the Netherlands, shed more light on some of these latest technological advances. Having insisted that mechanical recycling continues to play an important role, he focused on other options, such as solvent-based dissolution and thermochemical conversion. Based on current circumstances, he said he expected pyrolysis to be "a big factor in the future."

De Ruiter highlighted the growing involvement of major companies in the recycling sphere, as evidenced by the recent announcement of a Dow/Fuenix partnership covering the supply of pyrolysis oil feedstock made from recycled plastic to be used to make new polymers.

While some of the emerging recycling technologies might take many years to achieve commercialization, de Ruiter assured delegates: "It needs time, but it's unavoidable that we go in this direction."

BIR Plastics Committee board members also reviewed the latest key developments in their own countries and regions. Sally Houghton of the Plastics Recycling Corp. of California reported that, in the days prior to the meeting, California Gov. Gavin Newsom vetoed a bill that would have mandated minimum postconsumer-recycled content in plastic beverage containers. She described the decision as “surprising.”

For the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, the report submitted by Mahmoud Al Sharif of Sharif Metals International spoke of “good” scrap prices but slightly slow demand. Clément Lefebvre of Veolia Propreté France Recycling said market conditions are “not the best,” but he added that “good prices” are being offered for good quality.”

China has been showing less interest in pellets from Eastern Europe, and prices have been heading sharply lower, said Andrei Mihai Sofian of Rematholding Co. SRL in Romania.

China Scrap Plastics Association Executive President Steve Wong of Fukutomi Co. Ltd., Hong Kong, said current market conditions in Southeast Asia are “some of the most challenging ever.” He added that margins have contracted, with many recycling operations either going bankrupt or struggling to survive.

The BIR is compiling a list of plastics recycling operations—both mechanical processors and otherwise—which it aims to send to the governments of all Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries to assist them in making informed decisions about what materials can move to those facilities. BIR Trade & Environment Director Ross Bartley called on anyone with company listings or other relevant data to supply them to BIR ahead of the Oct. 31 deadline.

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