



Left to right: Henk Alssema, Vita Plastics; Martin Böschen, Texaid AG; Adina Renée Adler, ISRI; Ranjit Baxi, J&H Sales International; Michael Lion Everwell Resources; Tom Bird, Chiho Environmental Group; Arnaud Brunet, BIR (obscured by other panelists); and Murat Bayram, EMR Ltd.

BIR 2019: Seeking to hold the high ground

The recycling industry is poised to capitalize on a lower carbon emissions future, but it may need to bolster its reputation first.

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The energy savings and carbon emissions reduction aspects of using scrap materials should provide a bright future for the recycling sector, but the industry may need to bolster its reputation first, according to panelists at the International Trade Council meeting of the [Bureau of International Recycling \(BIR\)](#). The Brussels-based BIR held its 2019 World Recycling Convention in May in Singapore.

Convention Keynote Speaker Gabrielle Walker, a corporate and organizational strategy consultant based in the United Kingdom, told the assembled recyclers “It’s fine—it’s essential” to seek profits “while addressing climate change.” In a world where younger people in particular are demanding action on climate change, recyclers already are “fixing this” stated Walker, who urged them to “just do it faster.”

At the same time the energy savings and low carbon emissions benefits of recycling should be garnering positive attention, however, irresponsible recycling practices are causing some environmental advocacy groups to demonize recycling.

In a panel discussion moderated by ITC Chairman Michael Lion of Hong Kong-based Everwell Resources Ltd., Lion stated that recyclers “are supplying a critical amount of the raw material for the [manufacturing] supply chain, in an energy-efficient way.”

Nonetheless, the Chinese government has singled out scrap imports as environmentally problematic, having issued no import licenses yet for the second half of 2019, and claiming a more thorough scrap import ban will be in place Jan. 1, 2020. Panelist Murat Bayram, who works from Germany for United Kingdom-based [EMR Ltd.](#), said the China Nonferrous Metals Industry Association Recycling Metals Branch (CMRA) has “admitted that what happens after July 1 remains very unclear.”

BIR Director General Arnaud Brunet, who was hired into that role in May of 2017, said, “I arrived just at the time China announced its new laws. But I’m very proud of this industry. It is reactive and it adapts.”

New BIR President Tom Bird, who works for Hong Kong-based [Chiho Environmental Group](#), made a similar observation, saying, “I think we’re a very resilient industry; I think we’ll find solutions as we’ve always done.” Nonetheless, Bird said the Chinese market is likely to remain important, and that additional “clarity” from its regulators would be welcome.

Lion urged BIR members and staff to stress the environmental benefits of using scrap materials. “Has China thought about the excess energy involved in using virgin materials, which use exponentially, vastly more energy?” he asked. “The politicians will play to the gallery, because this story does not get out,” he added.

Both Bird and BIR Immediate Past President Ranjit Baxi, of London-based [J&H Sales International](#), agreed with the point, with Bird saying the BIR “has to be at the forefront” of telling the story. Stated Baxi, “We are not telling our story correctly. Our story has to be re-told time and again.”

Andy Wahl of U.S.-based [TAV Holdings](#) said recyclers should be wary of “relying on cheap labor” globally. “We have sophisticated technology and have to embrace that.” Doug Kramer of U.S.-based [Kramer Metals](#) urged those in attendance to consider the ethics of the other companies with which they trade.

Another issue harming recyclers is the labeling of scrap as “waste,” according to some panelists and attendees. Adina Renée Adler of the Washington-based [Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries \(ISRI\)](#) urged the delegates in attendance to return to the more than 45 countries represented “to talk to their governments about who you are; about your products,” she remarked, which are not a form of waste.

If the word “waste” is allowed to persist as a label, she warned, “There is nothing to stop the Basel Convention from turning to your product next.” Adler was referring to the United Nations-charted group’s rule-making and enforcement relative to the global trade of electronic scrap, and, potentially, plastic scrap. “Words are important,” added Kramer. “The BIR can be a critically important leader in messaging.”

Stated Lion to the BIR delegates, “You can’t just be the audience here. It is critical that everyone get engaged. There has to be an activist approach.”

The 2019 BIR World Recycling Convention & Exhibition was held May 19-22 at the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore.

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