



Textile recycling can no longer be offered free of charge

By Ian Martin

Europe's textile recycling industry continued to face a bleak outlook, not least because of competition from cheap new clothing of Far Eastern origin, payment problems among customers, and an 'unworkable' ratio of wearable to unwearable clothing. Conditions had to improve if the industry were to survive, was the warning issued at the BIR Textiles Division meeting in Berlin.

This concession offered only limited comfort to a beleaguered European textile recycling industry. BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof Schepke of Germany told the meeting in Berlin that collection of used clothes and other textiles was 'not a profitable business'. A large number of collection containers had been removed because they were making a loss or were simply 'too expensive to empty'. Meanwhile, many companies and charity organisations had chosen to withdraw from the sector, partly because the ratio of unwearable to wearable clothing was an 'unworkable' 70% to 30%, he estimated.

More pressure needed

Given that the European textile recycling industry was responsible for saving an estimated 3.5 million tonnes of material from landfill every year and for creating around 150 000 jobs, Mr Schepke suggested that more pressure needed to be applied to politicians within the EU in order to ensure that clothing and shoe manufacturers/distributors contributed towards the recycling and disposal of their products.

Textiles recycling 'is no longer a service that can be offered free of charge', declared Textiles Division Honorary President Klaus Löwer of Germany. Noting that non-marketable textiles were accepted without charge at landfill sites in Japan, he said 'free return of sorting residues and non-marketable textiles would be a big help in Europe'. He pointed to the recent crop of insolvencies and plant closure before suggesting that, if market conditions did not improve in the

near future, 'we can pack our bags'.

In what had been a 'disastrous' 2004 to date, Alan Wheeler of the U.K. Textile Recycling Association highlighted the cash flow problems surrounding African buyers, competition from cheap new clothing of Far Eastern origin, and a 'large excess of materials of all grades on the market'. In addition, a 'plague of rogue traders' had been picking up goods 'under false pretences' and selling to the industry's traditional markets, often without 'going to the expense and inconvenience of acquiring waste carriers and waste management licences'.

He went on to say: 'There is no uncut wiping cloth trade left in the U.K. and the price that the mills are paying for recyclables is at an all-time low.' In some instances, prices were failing even to cover the cost of the freight in the U.K., he added.

'Predatory' pricing

Reporting on the French market, Michèle Launay also spoke of payment problems in Africa as well as of the termination of some major door-to-door textile collection activities. 'Unsold items are becoming more and more numerous,' she confirmed. Meanwhile, the German market was suffering from the 'increasingly predatory' pricing of new clothing from the Far East while a general lack of Third World demand for the industry's goods was putting tens of thousands of jobs at risk, according to Gunther Krippendorf. And Sauro Ballerini of Italy warned that, without a change of market conditions in the near future, 'we won't be here any longer to talk about it'.



Guest Speaker Dr Andreas Jaron, Head of Division at Germany's Ministry for the Environment (left) and BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof Schepke of Germany.



Michèle Launay, Secretary General of the French recycling federation Federec and BIR's Environmental & Technical Director Ross Bartley.

The report from Hans Brak of Vereniging Herwinning Textiel in The Netherlands spoke of a substantial drop in his association's membership numbers, mainly as a result of company failures. Many firms were looking instead to set up plants in countries where the labour costs were lower than those in Europe, he said.

A market report from Australia also mentioned the pressure imposed on the textile recycling sector by the availability of cheap new clothing from Asia 'at below the second-hand price'. Survival might ultimately depend on having operations in countries where costs were lower, it was suggested. □

The Siegestsäule (Victory Column) towers in the middle of Tiergarten on a square called the 'Grosser Stern'. The monument commemorates the triumphs of the Prussian army.

Legislators were not focusing their attention directly on the textiles recycling sector 'because it had not been identified as a problem,' it was stated in Berlin by Dr Andreas Jaron, Head of Division at Germany's Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. Intervention was really required only in instances where difficulties existed 'but the textiles sector is not giving environmental problems,' he underlined.



Bankruptcies dent the industry's image

European plastics recyclers who did not make their own products were encountering 'really difficult' market conditions, BIR Plastics Round-Table Chairman Peter Daalder of The Netherlands told delegates in Berlin.

By Ian Martin

Tyres Round-Table

More pressure for tyre recycling innovation

The EU effectively banned the land-filling of whole tyres in July last year and, as a result, an extra 750 000 tonnes of tyres was now entering the marketplace every year. Thus, the pressure to develop markets for recycled tyres had become even more intense, according to Barend Ten Bruggencate of The Netherlands.

He pointed to research projects involving industry representatives and some leading European universities, and noted that further investment in tyre recycling research was envisaged by the Brussels-based rubber industry organisation BLIC (Bureau de Liaison des Industries de Caoutchouc). And he drew particular attention to the development in Canada of a building material derived from scrap tyres whose

characteristics resembled those of stone. 'Tests have been done and the forecasts are really good,' he told delegates. Such innovations were essential, Mr Ten Bruggencate added, given that the market was currently witnessing an increase in stocks, pressure on margins and a decline in granulate prices.

Several established EU member states - notably the U.K. - were encountering problems in implementing the legislation introduced last year and some were 'still relying on landfill for disposing of a significant proportion of their scrap tyre arisings', he went on to say. Meanwhile, new EU member Poland was expected to encounter problems because many of its private landfill operators were either bankrupt or likely to go bankrupt in the near future.

Mr Ten Bruggencate, who agreed to chair the BIR Tyres Round-Table in Berlin despite having stepped down from the post at the previous convention in Vienna, pointed out that notification was required for exports of all wastes to Poland and to four other new member states of the EU - namely Hungary, Latvia, Malta and Slovakia.



Barend ten Bruggencate of The Netherlands.

Since many of these companies were financed by the banks, 'it is not easy for them to sail a different course,' Mr Daalder explained. 'Because of that, the pressure is so high that they will buy material at higher prices than the budget allows. This has been happening for many years now and the banks are no longer willing to take the risk and give extra money. Therefore, it mostly ends with a bankruptcy.'

According to Mr Daalder, this familiar pattern of events 'is very bad for the reputation of the plastics recycling branch in general'.

The Round-Table Chairman claimed that prices of recycling granules were 'too low' with black LDPE, for example, regularly trading at 50% or more below the virgin price compared to the normal differential of between 25 and 35%. 'The reason for this is that prices of end products like garbage bags, low pressure pipes, agricultural foil and replacements for wood are under pressure,' he said.

Enrico Bobbio of Polieco confirmed that the Italian market had deteriorated since the previous BIR convention in Vienna last October. There was a lack of raw material on the domestic market while bulk shipments were being made from Europe to the Asian market. He called for action at EU level to tackle what he considered to be the indifference of plastics producers to mechanical recycling, adding that their preference was to burn plastics to recover energy. Mills in Spain were also suffering from the effects of large-scale shipments of raw material to Asia, according to market spokesman Marc Figueras. Greater protection was required for the country's plastics recyclers 'otherwise some of them will disappear', he contended.



BIR Plastics Round-Table Chairman Peter Daalder of The Netherlands



Enrico Bobbio of Italy (left) and Jacques Musa of France.

Guest speaker at the Plastics Round-Table in Berlin was Dr Thomas Probst, a plastics recycling expert within the Bonn-based bvse organisation. He maintained that, despite the 'very different standards in operation' in China, the principle of free trade dictated that European exports of PET to the country would continue.

According to Dr Probst, many issues surrounding Germany's new mandatory deposit scheme remained to be settled, to the extent that he likened its introduction to 'opening Pandora's Box'. The scheme was helping to create 'winners and losers', he said, with composite board packaging having gained ground while beverage cans had 'virtually vanished from the German market'. □