

THE ENTERPRISE FORUM

BRINGING BUSINESS CLOSER TO POLITICS

Plastic, the Environment and the BPF

We have the environment coming out of our ears! The biggest business trend over the last 10 years has been the growth in environmental consciousness of business leaders throughout the world. Some observers might be sceptical saying that for some this espousal of new values only goes skin deep and, with some justice claim that 'sustainability' is just the concept of 'profitability' rechristened in a politically correct way. Nevertheless green issues are here to stay and I think that is good for plastics and the plastics industry! That's because the business of the plastics industry IS Sustainability. The benefits of plastics from an environmental point of view are getting better documented all the time in all their key applications: packaging goods, in transport, construction.

The primary benefit, eagerly sought by industrial users and consumers alike, is the efficient use of resources which plastics represent, particularly efficiencies in energy usage.

The starting point is that plastics materials use only 4% of available oil in their manufacture, the bulk of the oil being consumed in transportation and heating. Plastics products should really be seen as 'frozen oil' because once used and recycled to their limits this energy source can be recovered. Plastics, in general, have a higher calorific value than coal and can be safely incinerated with the resulting energy used in district heating schemes and for national power supply. This point has not been lost on UK government. In its latest Energy Review it acknowledged the importance of Energy from Waste particularly when set against the shortfall of domestically produced energy.

A major contribution to energy efficiency is also made during the use of plastics products. Because they are so light – compare the weight of a plastics bottle with a glass one – and at the same time so tough – polypropylene for example has been described as the 'new mild steel' – they help to minimise the amount of energy consumed in transporting products from point of manufacture along the supply chain to the final consumer.

This is particularly the case with packaging in addition to the protection afforded to foodstuffs and the minimisation of food waste, the light weight of plastics packaging materials means that the lorries transporting packed food and drinks from warehouse to the supermarket are using less fuel and emitting less pollution than if they were transporting goods packed in heavier materials. The greater design freedom available with plastics packaging also enables the number of vehicles and containers needed to be reduced, thus further magnifying the fuel savings. The amount of warehousing space required is also reduced which means less lighting, heating and/or refrigeration. In summary, if plastics packaging did not exist and society had recourse to alternative forms of packaging the weight of packaging would increase fourfold and energy consumed for packaging would double.

This year we will be celebrating the 75th Anniversary of the British Plastics Federation. We have much to do to promote the benefits of Plastics and represent the industry, our membership of the Enterprise Forum is essential for the latter.

Peter Davis OBE is Director General of the British Plastics Federation, and since 2001 has been Deputy Chairman of the Enterprise Forum.

