

Sea of plastic: drowning in the new legislation?

The recently-published EU Plastics Strategy comes under scrutiny to see how much it could have an affect on the construction industry in Europe

In the midst of growing alarm about the state of our oceans, full of plastic that is killing marine life and polluting our planet, the EU Plastics Strategy has just been published, and apart from the fact that we obviously need a solution, the strategy is a logical step, with its origins in the Circular Economy Action Plan.

For the construction industry, it should not be a nuisance – unless new measures do not take account of the legislation that already exists.

Looking at the figures published by the European Commission, construction is indeed a big consumer of plastic. In fact, the industry is cited as being the second biggest user behind packaging, with 19.7% of overall demand.

Plastic is used in many construction materials, being versatile, light and delivering many benefits, such as effective insulation in buildings. Therefore, it is not surprising that our industry is identified in the strategy.

However, this does not mean that plastic used in construction frequently ends up in our oceans. Moreover, although it generates

a considerable amount of waste, construction produces only a modest amount of the overall total – a mere 5% compared with packaging at 59%.

The Commission's figures show that waste plastic from construction is on a par with the automotive and agricultural industries, and behind electrical and electronic equipment, which generates 8% of all plastic waste.

But construction and demolition waste plastic is different to single-use items.

RECYCLING AND RE-USE

FIEC and its members are committed to do whatever is possible to reduce waste in the industry, and we believe that improvements in both materials and in their traceability will ultimately have a positive impact on recycling and re-use, not to mention on indoor air quality and the health of building occupants.

Better data and the use of BIM will also enable deconstruction of buildings and more effective identification, sorting and treatment of waste, including plastic.

However, it should also be stressed that one of the reasons for the difference in the above figures for demand and those for waste, is that once installed in buildings and infrastructure, plastic materials stay there for some time, maybe decades.

These materials are not the single-use items that make up

most of what is littering our beaches and oceans. Plastic cups, bags, cutlery and cigarette packets are the worst offenders here, and steps have already been taken, such as measures against plastic bags.

This does not mean that there is nothing to do in construction, though.

The main problems identified during the development of the EU Construction & Demolition Waste Protocol were lack of conveniently-located recycling facilities, lack of information about content of demolition waste and lack of demand for recycled products – a result partly of concerns about the quality of secondary materials.

It should also be remembered that many buildings that are being demolished now were constructed many decades ago, when safety standards were lower and knowledge about toxic materials far less than we have today, so to a certain extent the problem has been inherited.

BROADLY WELCOMED

Apart from this Protocol, FIEC welcomes any measures that will improve traceability of materials and make recycling and re-use easier. With this in mind, the Plastics Strategy is broadly welcomed, although FIEC needs to undertake a deeper analysis and will consult its members in the coming weeks.

What can already be said is that the market for secondary

materials will only grow if clients are reassured that such materials are safe and of sufficient quality – and that the price of these materials does not outweigh the environmental benefits.

Given the costs associated with collection, sorting and cleaning, etc, recycled materials are not necessarily cheaper and this deters buyers. Indeed, demand for recycled plastics in general accounts for only 6% of overall demand.

European standards can help. However, although they will help to improve quality, they could also drive up cost.

Information about materials is critical and the work that is being done by the Commission on the interface between chemicals, waste and product policies is crucial.

Nevertheless, FIEC calls for compatible measures that are as streamlined as possible, while addressing all aspects, including indoor air quality and health.

Any lack of co-ordination of existing measures with new ones would be counter-productive and could result in duplication and additional costs for the industry.

DUPLICATION

We have already raised concerns about possible duplication in the Ecodesign legislation and Product Environmental Footprint Category Rules, which in some cases appear to add another layer of regulation to the industry's main product legislation, the Construction Products Regulation (CPR).

So, our message is simple – yes to a Plastics Strategy, but make it compatible with the CPR and other relevant legislation.

In a year during which we expect a decision about the revision or repeal of the CPR, coherent policy making is particularly important. **ce**



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