

PlasticsEurope statement on Friends of the Earth report

PlasticsEurope is concerned with some of the statements made in the publication of the report "[Unwrapped – How throwaway plastic is failing to solve Europe's food waste problem](#)" carried out by Friends of the Earth and Zero Waste Europe on behalf of Rethink Plastics Alliance.

Plastic packaging prevents food waste

Life-cycle Assessment (LCA) is a technique to assess environmental impacts and benefits associated with all the stages of a product's life from raw material extraction through materials processing, manufacture, distribution, use, repair and maintenance, and disposal or recycling.

Any scientific method can be optimized, and especially for LCA some important improvements were achieved through e.g. the latest activities around the EC Product Environmental Footprint pilots¹ and methodical harmonization of calculating impacts of Land Use Change². The importance of having a widely accepted recognized tool such as LCA at hand is that it enables the results of choices to be quantitatively measured. For instance, it quantifies the environmental impacts of different packaging solutions as well as the benefits of reduced food waste, where such waste reduction is a direct and quantitatively proven effect of using packaging or improved packaging solutions.

PlasticsEurope actively supports and participates with the scientific community to ensure that robust data is included in the life cycle assessment studies. For instance, PlasticsEurope supports the collective research project on "Stop waste – Save food" funded by the Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG)³. Through specific case studies for the reduction of food waste in the value chain (processing–packaging–logistics–retail–consumers–recovery), it aims to establish more quantitative data on food losses that can be included in life cycle assessments of packaging options. The project is expected to be finalized by the end of 2019 and will no doubt further inform life cycle assessments for packed goods.

A fair evaluation of the actual impacts and benefits of plastic food packaging can only be based on the comparison of the same food supply systems, on the one hand without plastic packaging, and on the other hand with plastic packaging, unbiased by other influences which can massively change e.g. over time. While this exercise might not be possible for the total food sector, recent studies have evaluated such comparisons for specific products, where practical real data on reduced food waste due to packaging changes were available on retail level.

Some quantitative examples already available from denkstatt (2014/2017)⁴ showed for instance that optimizing the packaging for a sirloin steak resulted in a reduction of food waste from 12% to 3%. The respective net reduction in carbon footprint was 10 times higher than the total impact

¹ http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eussd/smgp/ef_pilots.htm

² <https://quantis-intl.com/lucguidance/>

³ Austrian Research Promotion Agency (FFG) – Project 856292: "Stop waste – Save food: Innovative Verpackungs- und Prozessierungslösungen zur Abfallreduktion auf Handels- und Konsumentenebene" (2016 – 2019)

⁴ denkstatt (2014/2017): How packaging contributes to food waste prevention, http://denkstatt.at/files/How_Packaging_Contributes_to_Food_Waste_Prevention_V2.0.pdf

of packaging production. Similar results are available for packed cheese, yeast buns, garden cress and cucumbers.

Plastic packaging is there for a reason

The production and consumption of food has been increasing with population growth and affluence. According to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), up to one third of all food is spoiled worldwide before it is consumed by people⁵. But while rich countries waste food, this primarily occurs at the level of the consumer; the main issue for developing countries is food lost due to weak infrastructure – including poor storage, processing and packaging facilities that lack the capacity to keep produced food fresh. In this regard, FAO recommends strengthening the food supply chain, urging investment in infrastructure and transportation, along with increased attention to food storage, processing and packaging. Plastic packaging is key to minimizing wastage along the food value chain. In a sustainable society, using modern packaging and storage systems, wastage can be reduced dramatically.

When looking at food waste in general, the most important influences are quality of food and food processing, careful attention to optimal storage conditions (e.g. cooling), optimized order management at retail level, and demand-oriented buying behavior of the consumer. “Not even the most optimized packaging can fully compensate mistakes in one of these areas” – this was one of the main conclusions of a survey across all Austrian retailers on the correlation between food waste and packaging.⁶

Nevertheless, packaging plays an important role in ensuring the freshness of food, extends its shelf life and helps to improve the quality of products for consumers. However, consumption patterns have changed in the industrialized world. There is an increasing number of single person-households and the grazing phenomenon where families eat at different times has led to increased demand for smaller portion packages; and plastics use overall has grown to satisfy such societal trends

PlasticsEurope has always supported a sustainable use of resources and will continue to do so. Practices which would over-promote goods need to be divorced from the basic functionality and intrinsic utility of packaging and the packed good themselves. It is important to make consumers aware of the importance of not to wasting food, which generally leads to much higher impacts than the footprint of packaging.

Zero Plastics to the Environment

PlasticsEurope has consistently been calling for zero plastics to landfill and finds it unacceptable that plastics are discarded carelessly in the environment and in our oceans. No plastic waste should end up where it does not belong.

Better understanding of the social dimension on how and why food gets wasted and how and why plastic waste leaks into the environment are key to finding the appropriate solutions for society. PlasticsEurope entirely agrees that society should not waste any valuable resources, whether this is food or food packaging after its service life. That said, we should not lose sight of the crucial function of plastic packaging to prevent food losses. This is why PlasticsEurope invites Rethink Europe to participate in the work of the scientific LCA community to continuously upgrade the LCA tool with robust and reliable data.

⁵ <http://www.fao.org/docrep/014/mb060e/mb060e00.pdf>

⁶ denkstatt (2014/2017): How packaging contributes to food waste prevention, http://denkstatt.at/files/How_Packaging_Contributes_to_Food_Waste_Prevention_V2.0.pdf