

Interview with Ingemar Bühler from PlasticsEurope Deutschland

“There’s No Point in Arguing over Chemical versus Mechanical Recycling”

Over the last year, the German branch of the Association of Plastics Manufacturers, PlasticsEurope Deutschland, consistently advocated the technology of chemical recycling. Meanwhile, chemical recycling has not only been criticized by environmental organizations but also from parts of the industry. **Kunststoffe** interviewed Ingemar Bühler, CEO of the Association, about this criticism and the competition between mechanical and chemical recycling. In the interview, Bühler also addresses further requirements for a circular economy with plastics and explains why he considers a label for plastics products a sensible idea.

Most industry representatives agree that the circular economy is a key future issue for the plastics industry. But when it comes to the specifics of its implementation, there are differing opinions, such as on the method of chemical recycling. Lately, the German branch of the Association of Plastics Manufacturers, PlasticsEurope Deutschland, has strongly advocated for the chemical recycling of plastics waste. In our interview with Ingemar Bühler, the Managing Director of the association, we dived a bit deeper in order to understand the rationale for this advocacy. Furthermore, Mr. Bühler gave us a brief progress report on his first year at the helm.

Kunststoffe: Mr. Bühler, you have now been in office for a year. Can you give us a progress report on your first twelve months?

Ingemar Bühler: There are two things in particular of which I

am proud: despite the difficult pandemic situation, I was able to get to know many people from the industry, sometimes in person, both plastics manufacturers as well as plastics processors and packaging and machinery manufacturers. I am delighted I was allowed to learn about many different perspectives and having personal conversations while making sure

every meeting was held in a responsible manner. In addition, we as an association have succeeded by significantly expanding our communications activities. We have further developed our presence in trade publications and yet had to build new relations with leading dailies and online media. Gladly, we have been able to reach significantly

more people and opinion leaders than in the past.

Kunststoffe: In recent months, it has seemed like the plastics trade associations have been cooperating more closely together. Was that prompted by a concern of yours or was it mainly a response to the tarnished reputation of the industry?

Bühler: Indeed we are working more closely together. And we are in constant touch with each other. This was not always the case. To me, however, it is absolutely crucial for our industry. The strong criticism experienced by the plastics industry has also played a role in this. Cooperation between the trade associations is very important because the industry itself is very much fragmented in organizations that operate in different areas across the value chain. However, our common goal –

“Transformation to a circular economy must be completed in the next 25 years. Otherwise that would be a disastrous failure.”

Ingemar Bühler

Info

Digital Version

A PDF file of the article can be found at www.kunststoffe-international.com/archive

German Version

Read the German version of the article in our magazine **Kunststoffe** or at www.kunststoffe.de

which is to create a circular economy and enable a climate neutral way of doing business – can only be reached if our industry's main actors work closely together. And the current transformation is changing this for the better. Companies that have traditionally been far apart from each other in the value chain now have to act as partners in a circular and deeply connected, intertwined economy.

Kunststoffe: *The trade associations often represent different interests. This surely makes cooperation difficult.*

Bühler: Absolutely. Yet, I was surprised to learn that these differences were frequently argued out vehemently and loudly in the past while the companies we represent are actually customers of each other who are interested in a close, long-term relationship.

Kunststoffe: *In October last year you published a joint position paper on the circular economy with the recycling associations BDE (Federation of the German Waste, Water, and Raw Materials Management Industry) and bvse (German Federal Association for Secondary Raw Materials and Waste Management). In the past, PlasticsEurope Deutschland and these two associations have taken very different positions in relation to chemical recycling. Has that changed?*

Bühler: We continue to take different positions on chemical recycling. In my opinion, what has changed is an understanding of each other's viewpoint. From the recyclers' perspective, these processes are not considered recycling as such but rather as chemical recovery. This viewpoint is legitimate and we don't want to get hung up on that. The crucial thing for us is to achieve the highest possible recovery rate for plastics waste. To get there, we must use every technology proven to be safe and effective. What is more difficult, on the other hand, is a second point. Through chemical recycling, plastics manufacturers are going to become recyclers for the first time. Many companies feel threatened by this. However, this point also works the other way. Through mechanical recycling, some recyclers become plastics manufacturers or at least very close partners of the manufacturers.

Kunststoffe: *So are mechanical and chemical recycling in competition then? In the past, Plastics Europe Deutschland has always spoken of the two as complementary processes.*

Bühler: There is a competitive aspect for sure. Yet, in my opinion, the fear of some companies to no longer receive sufficient plastics waste to process in the long run, has no basis. This fear is a result of missing the crucial point. The plastics industry has the task of achieving CO₂-neutral production. At the same time, we are sitting on a global pile of waste that contains a very large quantity of plastic. Arguing over chemical and mechanical recycling will not take us any further forward on either of these issues. We must keep our eyes on the big picture. To achieve a successful circular economy, it is not necessary to make a definitive choice between chemical and mechanical recycling. In fact, I believe that four technologies are key to get to a climate neutral plastics industry.

Kunststoffe: *What are those?*

Bühler: The technologies required are mechanical and chemi-



About the Interviewee

For a year now, **Ingemar Bühler** has been steering the destiny of PlasticsEurope Deutschland as Managing Director. Before being in charge for the German branch of the Association of Plastics Manufacturers on January 1st 2021, the 40-year-old worked for the Bayer Group for twelve years. At the Leverkusen/ Germany-based company, he held various positions in public relations and policy communication, ending up in the agricultural division of the company as Head of Public Affairs & Sustainability. Bühler studied Political Science and International Affairs at Friedrich-Alexander University Erlangen-Nuremberg, Germany, and Economics at Oxford University, United Kingdom.

© PlasticsEurope Deutschland

cal recycling, carbon capture utilization and biomass utilization. These four are necessary to make the plastics industry climate-neutral and create a circular economy for plastics. For this transformation, a large amount of energy is required. The industry can only achieve CO₂-neutral production if all plants are converted to electrical operation and the power for them comes from regenerative sources. This is, by the way, the only point at which thermal recycling will possibly have a place in the future – to supply the recycling processes with energy. I see the upcoming K trade fair for plastics and rubber as a very important milestone for this transformation. At the last K in 2019, there »

was already a great deal of talk about the circular economy. Now we must make it happen. The transformation must be completed in the next 25 years. If we do not succeed in this, that would be a disastrous failure.

Kunststoffe: *So far, efforts to create a circular economy have been very piecemeal. Where should the comprehensive view come from?*

Bühler: Green energy, recycling technologies, biomass and CO₂ utilization – all huge topics in themselves already.

We therefore require a national or European strategy to encompass them. For this, we need a coming together of bright minds from all sectors, who can drive the transformation forward together. The buck-passing between politicians, business and society that we have seen so far will not take us any further forward. All participants must look beyond

their own horizon. The plastics industry has learnt this from painful experience with marine littering. It is not a fair position to argue that our industry only manufactures the products and is not involved in their disposal, particularly when it comes to unsealed landfill. For me, this is no argument. A global industry with innovation and market leaders carries immense communicative and political weight as well as a certain degree of shared responsibility for their products. If we have solutions available beyond our own market radius, then we must offer them. Unfortunately, our

industry has often lacked this mindset in recent decades.

Kunststoffe: *Besides the position paper with the BDE and bvse, you have also published a recommendation paper with the German Chemical Industry Association (VCI) and the Expert Network for Chemical Engineering and Biotechnology in Germany (Dechema) especially on chemical recycling. Do you see a particular need for action there?*

Bühler: Yes, we do. Chemical recycling has so far been neglected at the

“Simple labels about the recyclates content of products are necessary to enable customers to make an informed purchasing decision.”

Ingemar Bühler

national and European level. This is partly due to the fact that it has considerably higher energy and chemical consumption than mechanical recycling. Many have failed to understand that, despite its high energy demand, chemical recycling can be self-sustaining. There are also great reservations towards the chemical industry in general – both in the political sphere and in wider society.

Kunststoffe: *There are also reservations towards the mass balance method normally used for quoting the content of*

chemically recycled plastics waste. Do you see possibilities for creating more confidence here?

Bühler: If the exact recyclates content in a product is not stated, this is difficult for consumers. But for the industry, the mass balance method is very important. Hence, to make it clear for consumers, we must radically simplify these highly technical and scientific topics. Simple labels are necessary that enable customers to make informed decisions. One possibility might be three-tier traffic light systems. This applies not just to recycle

content but also to the CO₂ footprint of products. On this point, we are also in agreement with many other plastics trade associations.

Kunststoffe: *The criticism of “green-washing” is often leveled against labels issued by trade associations*

and companies. Are state-approved labels necessary to increase consumer trust?

Bühler: In Germany, consumer trust in public authorities and government institutions is a bit better than trust in industry. Consequently, state-approved labels are the way forward. By the way: many of the existing labels were originally initiated by industry. To strengthen trust in such labels, it is also important to include environmental and consumer protection organizations. ■

Interview: Susanne Schröder and Florian Streifinger, editors

Kunststoffe
international

News

Don't miss anything!

www.kunststoffe-international.com/newsletter

