

RECYCLING IS ADDED VALUE

Recycling for efficient utilization



Bergisch Gladbach, 22 September 2017

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EUROPE'S MOST MODERN WASTE SORTING SYSTEM IS IN ISERLOHN

The Yellow Bag in the Red-Light District.

PACKAGING WASTE. Europe's most modern waste sorting system is in Iserlohn – sensors separate miscellaneous plastics. BY BARBARA A. CEPIELIK

Iserlohn. How does a waste expert know that there was Christmas? By scrapped videocassettes whose tapes wrap around everything in the plastics sorting plant. At Christmas, a lot of electronic equipment is given as a present; storage media which became useless find their way into the yellow bag since people think that something they love would be precious and could be recycled. And this is the reason for the annoyance with old videocassettes in the waste sorting equipment of the Lobbe company in Iserlohn. For Mr. Klaus Bertmann, plant manager of the currently most modern plant of that type in Europe, they are undesirable "incorrect sortings" as well as the Christmas tree nets which no less interfere with the machines

Mr. Bertmann manages a plant which can sort record-breaking 45 percent of the delivered light-weight packagings so accurately that they can be recycled for the production of new products (tubes, bottles etc.) in an economically reasonable manner. Thus, the plant is significantly above the desired volume. And it is a showpiece, as Mr. Norbert Völl from the Green Dot Germany thinks. This is a 14-million Euro investment which offers much more than the 1.2 kilometers long conveyor belt in a huge hall. As in a labyrinth, the belts move above and below each other at a high speed and convey waste, plastics, film. 250 tons of plastics are processed every day, i.e. 45 truck loads. Finally, carefully sorted bales leave the house - pressed aluminium and tinplate as well.

Whatever the large excavator buckets provide for a separation is equivalent to a unique mess: bags, yoghurt cups, shampoo bottles, coffee capsules hurry along the belts,

tetrapacks and carton chips, indefinables as well. There is a sweetish smell such as in a refrigerator which has not been cleaned for a long time. The whole mess is astonishingly quickly separated in screening machines, magnetic separators, ballistic separators and eddy-current separators. It is good that waste cannot become dizzy. 15 sensor-based devices take care of the rest.

First of all, it's the foils' turn. They would impair the identification of the other materials. And then, everything else: separated by size and weight, some parts are blown away, other parts fall through slots to another conveyor section. What the layman would give the impression of a light barrier is near-infrared equipment identifying the most different plastics. No human being would be capable of doing this at this speed and this accuracy. Therefore: polypropylene here, polyethylene there. Coffee capsules – a significant amount of them can be seen – are united in the end, whether from a discounter or a brand product – all aluminium.

It is at the very end that some workers cast a glance to the whirled, shaken and joggled material and intervene here and there again to tidy up. In comparison with the scenarios 20 years ago when men with a face mask separated softener bottle by softener bottle, bag by bag – they did not dare dream that once there would be equipment which identifies the type of plastics of a damaged packaging.

Within one year 41 tons of tin plates leave the hall, 24 tons of former beverage cartons, 37 tons of ex- film ... but also an equivalent amount of (yet) non-marketable plastic waste which ends up in the incinerator (or as fuel oil substitute in the industry). There is a legal obligation to recycle 36 percent of the plastic waste "materially". This low rate stems from



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former times of the Packaging Ordinance (see "New Act"). As long as the lawmakers fail to enforce more material recycling only a few waste companies are ambitious enough to optimize their plant such that it provides a lot of material which is more than a filler for road construction or a pellet substitute. Whoever thinks that every yoghurt cup would become a yoghurt cup again, is on the wrong trail. Only half of the material thrown into the yellow bin will still end up in the incinerator – decently called "thermal utilization".

Therefore, a high yield of material such as in Iserlohn is worth the effort. By now, the plant utilization has been adjusted to quite a dozen of materials; "but on customer's request, you still can add more", the technical manager says. This means: Recycling efforts must pay – and customers have to be found. This is troublesome: products of recycled plastics are still considered niche products.

At the "Green Dot" in Cologne-Porz a small laboratory team has been working on it for a long time: First bottles for "Frosch" household products contain a considerable fraction of recycled yellow-bag plastics. A bio-market chain in Southern Germany decided on shopping baskets which are produced from recycled plastic granulate material. And the Henkel group just presented a plastic bottle shimmering pale pink which contains fractions from the yellow bin. More exactly: granular material from polyethylene of high density (HDPE) of the Systalen brand. This is the material which the "Green Dot" produces from recycled packagings. And thus the circle closes.

New bill will be passed by the cabinet

The first Packaging Ordinance from 1991 stipulated the beginning of waste separation. Since then, it has been amended seven times. The debates over non-returnable rates or reusable rates have accompanied the ordinance from the beginning. Despite all efforts to reduce the use of raw materials, the customers prefer non-returnable packagings too

frequently. The amount of packaging waste from German households has increased by 30 percent since 1995.

The new packaging law whose draft was passed by the cabinet shortly before Christmas and forwarded to the German Parliament (Bundestag) and Federal Council (Bundesrat) disappointed many environmentalists. But it includes one positive reform at least: it stipulated that approx. 63 percent (36 percent up to now) of the plastics packaging waste have to be "materially recycled", i.e. must not longer be incinerated.

Critics object that the protection of multiple-reuse systems has been eliminated – and that the introduction of the recycling bin is promoted insufficiently. That buckets, pots or bobycars can be thrown into the yellow bin like in Cologne is not possible everywhere at all and has the effect that raw materials can be recycled. (bce).

From Cologne bins

The Cologne plastic waste from the yellow bin (100 tons per day) is sorted at Ochtendung/Rhineland-Palatinate. The sorting system of the Suez company – in the vicinity of which premises for producing plastics from sorted waste were established – counts among the most modern plants in the country. The Cologne waste management companies attach much importance to pushing the recycling rate above the current minimum limits, according to their speaker, Mrs. Stephanie Ott. The AWB (waste management companies) request more stringent specifications for material recycling and sanctions for their non-compliance with the new law. (bce).

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