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Bioplastics going to landfill in Wales

Regarding the recent BBC article on compostable materials being landfilled please allow us from the BBIA to make a comment. (<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-47238220>)

We are the UK trade association of which many of the producers of compostable materials are members. You can see who they are at www.bbia.org.uk.

Compostable materials, as your article says, are considered a greener alternative to traditional plastics at a time when these are coming under increased public scrutiny. Brands as well as smaller, independent retailers and producers are switching some of their packaging to compostables. We applaud that and welcome the change in attitudes over the last two years- recognising that many brands are paying more to make the switch and doing so out of belief they are making the right environmental decision.

Let me say clearly, that they are.

There are two reasons why compostables, for some uses, are preferable to other materials. The first is their lower GHG emissions impacts in the production phase- being made from partly or totally plant based sources, these products use less oil and gas. As the Centre for International Environmental Law in DC, USA reported in 2018, 99% of plastics are made from fossil sources. At current rates, over 20% of all petroleum will be consumed to make plastics by 2050 with consequential increases in emissions contributing to climate change. Exxon Mobil, one of the world's largest companies, earned a quarter of all its profits in 2015 from making chemicals mostly destined to plastic production.

The second reason is that compostable materials can be recycled through composting- they biodegrade naturally at temperatures of around 58c in an industrial composting plant. Unlike most plastics, composting of compostable plastics ensures their complete and total biodegradation- put simply, they disappear. And this ensures compost going to farmland is free of plastics- at present this is not the case because collection systems are poor and a lot of plastic waste is being delivered to composting plants. The unique selling point of compostables is that in disappearing they ensure that food waste collected with them is not contaminated as it is currently with vast quantities of plastic waste.

Professor Kevin O'Connor of Dublin University recently undertook a massive research to understand whether claims around compostability were verified in real conditions and found that **all** compostable materials tested biodegraded within the time frame for which they were certified- up to a maximum of six months and in the case of lightweight materials like films, within 3 months. (Environmental Science and Technology Journal, 2018 52 (18), 10441-10452, DOI: 10.1021/acs.est.8b02963)



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So whilst most plastics end up landfilled, incinerated or dumped in the developing world, with only around 9% being recycled in the UK, compostables can be reduced to air and water in industrial plants throughout the UK. The UK has around 55 composting plants suitable for processing foodservice compostables and another 150+ that could process compostable drinks cups, lids and stirrers. This is not by any means an insignificant availability of infrastructure.

And herein lies the problem evidenced in the BBC article. To be composted these materials need to be sent to a compost plant. Often they are not.

The waste industry is a very slow industry in terms of adapting to new materials. We are still sending large quantities of electronic waste abroad because we have not got the infrastructure in the UK to handle it. We are still exporting plastic and paper waste due to lack of infrastructure. And we have had electronics, paper and plastic wastes to deal with for decades now. We are still landfilling some 30% of our waste due to lack of infrastructure and exporting some 3 million tonnes too. The system is broken. Whilst Wales is better than the rest of the UK, we still need time to react to these new materials and sort out the way in which they are collected and treated. It will take time, but the system is slow to move because of long term contracts with waste operators, investments in large and inflexible plants needing amortising, and the consequent potential loss of income derived from diverting waste away from these.

We are working with Government (DEFRA has just published its consultations on all these issues) and local authorities to help them understand the various scenarios. Above all flexibility is needed so councils have different treatment options as waste streams change- and they will always change as new materials come on stream and as new evidence on soil, air and water pollution becomes available.

By using compostable materials, retailers, producers and consumers are sending out a strong message to local authorities and the Government- we need a system fit for purpose which will ensure these materials are correctly collected and handled alongside all those other streams currently landfilled, incinerated or exported. Michael Gove has said he wants to end UK exports of waste to developing countries, getting our own collection and infrastructure right is critical to achieving this.

For more information call David Newman BBIA Managing Director on 0744 284 8834 or email dn@bbia.org.uk