

PVC sector draws positives from self-commitment drive

The PVC industry embarked on Vinyl 2010, its sustainability commitment, to stave off criticism from green groups and pressure from regulators. Six years on, Ian Mundell gets an update from the initiative's chairman, Josef Ertl

In the late 1990s the polyvinyl chloride (PVC) industry faced criticism from green groups and was singled out for regulatory attention by the European commission over its environmental impacts. It decided to take action and in 2000 established a ten-year voluntary commitment to sustainability, called Vinyl 2010.

The initiative is supported by trade associations for vinyl manufacturers, plastics converters and producers of stabilisers, plasticisers and intermediates. It focuses on heavy metal additives and waste recycling, but it also takes account of emissions from PVC resin manufacture and social dialogue on environmental issues.

ENDS met Josef Ertl, managing director of German PVC manufacturer Vinnolit and chair of Vinyl 2010. He talked about what the initiative meant to the industry and how successful it had been.

Q Did your industry have a high level of environmental awareness when Vinyl 2010 was proposed?

A "Yes, I think we had a very high level of awareness. We had been committed to Responsible Care [the chemical industry's voluntary environmental commitment] and product stewardship in the past. Sustainability was very high on our agenda. This was the basis on which we started the discussion: how can we, as an industry, contribute to sustainability. Then we came up with the idea of being responsible for the whole product, from cradle to grave, and we initiated this 'self-commitment'."

Q Has Vinyl 2010 shown that the industry can manage its own sustainability?

A "Up to now, yes. At that time there was a lot of discussion in the European commission and parliament about PVC and PVC products. What we tried to do was set our own targets and agree upon them, together with the authorities and politicians. But we didn't achieve that goal, so it has remained a self-commitment."

There was a suggestion the commission would issue a PVC policy document or communication. Its decision not to was a mixed blessing for the industry: it removed the threat of specific environmental regulation, but left unresolved questions about PVC's environmental credentials. These have returned to haunt the industry and PVC's poor

reputation is still cited as a barrier to its use, for instance in discussions on public procurement and ecolabelling.

Q Are you disappointed that the commission never issued an official document? And do you still hope it will happen?

A "When we set up the voluntary commitment, we thought it might be possible to have a positive communication from the commission, but this has not happened. My personal view is that, thanks to our activities, PVC has lost its priority as an issue. The authorities have seen that here is an industry being responsible for what it is doing, and they have decided to see if that industry is really prepared to deliver and achieve its goals and objectives. Therefore there is no pressure to have a communication. I don't think there will be one within the next couple of years. Personally, I think that the responsibility with which we handle these issues should be enough to convince the politicians that we take seriously our commitment to sustainable development."

Q What interaction is there between Vinyl 2010 and the authorities?

A "We have set up a monitoring committee, with high-ranking participants from the commission and the parliament. This involves active conversation and cooperation. The committee's main task is to monitor our activities. That means proving to them that what we are stating publicly really gets done. The members also give us some feedback on whether our achievements are welcomed or not, and if our targets fit into the political scenery. That's important for us. From time to time you have to think about your objectives and your goals, and you

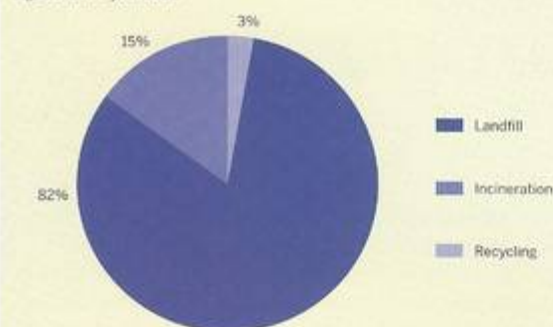
EU PVC PRODUCTION FIGURES IN 2005

Rigid grades	Tonnes
Profiles	1,507,750
Pipes and fittings	1,335,700
Rigid film	530,290
Other rigid	218,578
Plates	116,565
Miscellaneous rigid and bottles	72,829
Flexible grades	
Cables and electrical wires	395,514
Flex film sheet	326,948
Flooring – paste	187,653
Coated fabric paper	183,300
Others – non-paste	183,179
Tubes profiles	139,286
Others – paste	135,924
Flooring – non-paste	84,169

Source: Plastics Europe

FATE OF POST-CONSUMER PVC WASTE*

*Figures for the year 2000



Source: European Commission life cycle assessment of PVC and of principal competing materials (2004)

need to know how the world is changing on the political side. This dialogue between industry and politicians is very important."

Q Has the initiative helped reduce pressure from green groups?

A "In principle, yes. But it is just one part. I think that the whole discussion about PVC and PVC-related issues is more fact-based and science-based now than it has been in the past. It is less emotional than 10-15 years ago. But this is due to the achievements of the whole industry in the past, not only during the years of the voluntary commitment."

Q What progress is Vinyl 2010 making against its targets?

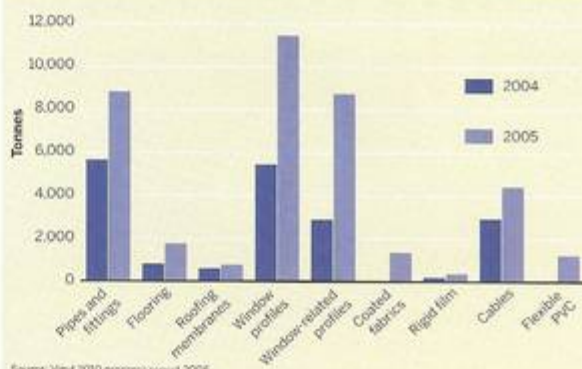
A "Vinyl 2010 has succeeded in achieving most of its objectives. Cadmium stabilisers have been phased out and the reduction of lead stabilisers is on track: we have reduced them by more than 20 per cent compared with 2000, against a reduction target for 2005 of 15 per cent. In recycling we have four different segments, with different objectives. For rigid PVC, that means pipes. They exceeded the goal last year; and for window and other profiles, we reached our mid-term goals. In total, we doubled the volume recycled from 2004 to 2005, so I think it's a great success."

Meeting the recycling targets depends on the supply of waste material and demand for the reprocessed PVC. On the supply side, Vinyl 2010 has found much less post-consumer PVC waste available for recycling than predicted. One problem is that some products are lasting much longer than expected or, as is the case with windows, being reused rather than entering the waste stream.

In other cases, waste is not available for collection, being physically out of reach or too expensive to recover. This latter problem has hit Vinyl 2010's commitment on PVC flooring waste because of its high contamination levels. That target has been abandoned, although work will continue on alternative recycling methods. Meanwhile, efforts will switch to other waste streams, although targets have not been adopted.

Another issue is that waste is a global commodity and European recyclers have to compete with companies that have lower labour costs. If material leaves Europe, it does not count towards the target.

PVC RECYCLING VOLUMES



Source: Vinyl 2010 progress report 2006

This waste scarcity will be slightly compensated for by extending Vinyl 2010 to the new EU states, but the global target of recycling 200,000 tonnes of PVC by 2010 is still considered ambitious. Much hangs on the implementation of the EU landfill directive, which will make recycling more cost effective. Germany is one of the few places to have positive progress to report. Its recycling levels have risen since a national ban on untreated waste came in last year.

Q Are you satisfied with the existing targets or do you envisage reviewing them?

A "We will stick to our goals – the targets that we set in 2000 – but we also have to take account of the lessons learned during the past five years by developing collection schemes and technologies to recycle different PVC products. Up to now, flooring is the only target we have had to abandon. All the others we have managed to achieve, and we are pretty sure we will meet them in the future."

Q Where is your industry on the path to sustainability?

A "We came to these issues very early, and I think we have learned our lessons. We are committed to deliver what we promised, and therefore I think we are quite advanced in our approach to sustainability compared with other industries. We are certainly much stronger now in our ability to face potential problems than we were 10 years ago. When we started Vinyl 2010 we focused on the main issue at that time, which was the end of the life cycle – waste management, treatment and so on. What we should not forget is the positive contribution made by our products because of the way they perform when they are in use. You have to take into account the whole lifetime."

WEBLINKS

JOSEF ERTL

Josef Ertl joined Vinnolit in 1998 as head of the thermoplastics business unit before becoming managing director in 2001. Before Vinnolit he was global production manager for inorganic chemistry at Hoechst Group, where he had started his career in R&D after completing a chemistry doctorate.

