

# Sustainability – what does it really mean for the UK food packaging industry?

Along with the excitement of returning to the ‘new normal’, the quest for sustainable packaging is also gaining momentum with impending material certifications and the introduction of the plastics packaging tax in the UK. Just how this translates into the food packaging industry is still uncertain.

**T**here is a growing awareness on the importance of creating a sustainable world. This takes many forms, one of which is to reduce the amount of plastic in our lives and recycle the plastic we do use wherever possible. The plea to ‘eradicate single use plastics’ is being broadcast across media platforms together with the call for more plastic packaging to be recycled. Of course, unless in the industry, the differences between plastic packaging and the ease by which they can be recycled is not necessarily understood. Here lies the dilemma. Yet, the UK is leading the world in committing time-specific goals to reduce plastic waste.



Krehalon's new range of readily recyclable high barrier KreCycle™ with no compromise on shelf life or sealing performance, designed in accordance with D4ACE guidelines.

## The only certainty is change!

In recent years, several organisations have been established to tackle plastics' role in the sustainability quandary.

CEFLEX is the European collaborative initiative representing the entire value chain of flexible packaging. It fully supports the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's Global Commitment for a New Plastics Economy which encourages a circular

economy of plastics to reduce the amount of virgin plastics used in packaging.

Cyclos-HTP Institute is one of the first expert organisations to design and implement an assessment procedure for post-consumer packaging. This Cyclos certification, also known as the CHI standard, is now widely accepted in the industry, particularly with CEFLEX stakeholders.

The UK Plastics Pact, led by WRAP (Waste & Resources Action Programme), is CEFLEX's British counterpart bringing together businesses from across the entire plastics value chain with UK government and NGOs to create a circular economy. The Pact has ambitious goals to improve plastic usage in the coming years. Members have set individual targets which are regularly reviewed. Companies failing to achieve these risk losing membership and their voice in the collaboration.

RECOUP, also UK-based, aims to lead the development of plastics recycling and resource management. It uses RecyClass certification—the ‘first approved’ certifica-

tion system for plastic packaging recyclability – developed by Plastic Recycling Europe (PRE). RecyClass itself is driven by the interest of brands, retailers, converters, raw material producers and recyclers to advance recyclability of plastic packaging, but RECOUP is the exclusive certification partner in UK.

OPRL (On-Pack Recycling Label), another UK organisation, is focused specifically on label certification. It aims to set clear standards if a product can be recycled in household recycling, front of store, at a recycling centre or not at all.

These three examples of certification – Cyclos, RecyClass and OPRL are all slightly different with their sustainability goals and recognition of the recyclability of a plastic packaging product. This is where the complexity and confusion begin. While OPRL focuses on correct labelling, Cyclos and RecyClass delve into the plastic material combination used in the product and how well it lends itself to recyclability.

In May, CEFLEX and UK Plastics Pact published a list ranking the recyclability hierarchy of plastics. This, influenced by the ease by which a plastic material can be mechanically or chemically recycled, discourages the use of less environmentally-friendly barrier types e.g. PVDC – commonly used in fresh meat packaging.

In addition, effective from 1 April 2022, a new Plastic Packaging tax, will apply to plastic packaging manufactured in, or imported into, the UK where the plastic used in its manufacture is less than 30% recycled plastic by weight. A tax of £200 will be levied per metric tonne of plastic packaging.

All companies involved in the plastic packaging industry are now required to register with the government and provide necessary records of their packaging even if the packaging manufactured/ imported contains more than 30% recycled plastic. The intention is to stimulate increased levels of recycling and collection of plastic waste, diverting it away from landfill or incineration.

This comes with the caveat that packaging should only contain recycled content where it is permitted to do so under other regulations, such as those covering food safety.

## What is the reality?

Away from the legislation, mainstream supermarkets, influenced by consumers, are pushing for recyclable packaging, too. So, which direction should food packaging producers take? How should recyclability and the UK Plastics tax be embraced?

## Is it better to:

Pay a premium to use purely recyclable plastic packaging i.e. plastic packaging that use mono-structures so it can be both



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Krehalon's KreLid™ Mono range has a range of seal options including 'burst peel' and reclose packs with 100% recyclable base web or pre-made tray in the PET recycling stream mechanically and chemically recycled?

## Or:

Use a thinner plastic packaging that does not contain recycled waste, but contains a structure that is recycle-ready when the UK opens its chemical recycling plants?

## Or:

Use packaging containing recycled waste? This could be thicker in future for the simple fact that today, plastic next to food must be contamination-free – currently this translates as 'virgin plastic' because recycled plastic is not yet widely certified to be 'pure'. (Interestingly, if a product contains recycled waste, it might not itself be recyclable after use).

## Considering a more sustainable offering

At Krehalon, we pride ourselves in having solutions already available for the first two options listed above for protein (fresh red meat, poultry, processed meat, seafood) and cheese packaging, and our development team are currently researching the third. Since 2018, we are an active member of UK Plastics Pact, RECOUP and CEFLEX.

Already, Krehalon is ahead of the trend with its ML40 standard shrink bag. For more than 30 years, the bag has demonstrated its exceptional advantage of reduced material thickness without compromising on the material's barrier properties or strength. On average, it is 23% thinner than competitor corresponding offerings. This means less plastic is used in the bag significantly reducing the packaging weight.

Moreover, instead of a PVDC

Krehalon's patented ML40 standard shrink bags are on average 23% thinner than other market offerings. Its innovative structure provides in-built puncture protection



Krehalon's ML40 shrink bag versatility is ideal for many applications; its wide sealing range allows for strong seals in all environments

barrier layer, commonly used in fresh meat packaging, Krehalon use an EVOH barrier. Why? Because the chlorine-based PVDC layer is considered harmful to the environment and is not currently recyclable since it causes corrosion and damage to the reprocessing equipment. Due to recent innovations in extrusion technologies, EVOH-based multilayer barrier packaging now offer similar meat quality levels under controlled storage easily meeting the retail shelf-life requirements.

Our most recent development is a recycle ready product range, KreCycle™. Developed with recyclability in mind, Krehalon's KreCycle™ product range uses Polyolefins, which are suitable for mechanical recycling whilst offering no compromise on shelf life and sealing performance.

The development of these structures is based on CEFLEX Design for a Circular Economy (D4ACE) Guidelines where EVOH barrier in PO-based structures should be no more than 5% of total weight.

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