

Statement - Recycled Plastic from Ireland Does Not Contribute to Ocean Pollution

02 July 2020: The Irish Waste Management Association (IWMA) has rejected the findings of a newly published report by NUIG and UL entitled, *“Recycling of European plastic is a pathway for plastic debris in the ocean”*. The report suggests that a proportion of polyethylene (PE) collected for recycling in all EU countries, including Ireland, ends up as ocean debris in Southeast Asia.

That finding is based on incorrect assumptions and the IWMA is surprised and disappointed that the authors of the report did not consult with the Irish waste industry as part of their research. If they had done so, they would know that IWMA member companies have measures in place that prevent such potential outcomes.

IWMA members collect a range of recyclable materials from households in the kerbside recycling bins including plastic bottles, pots, tubs, and trays. Separately, IWMA members also collect clear plastic film and plastic drums from commercial premises for recycling.

Soft plastics that are found in household waste comprise a mixture of plastic films including low density polyethylene (LDPE) and other polymers, some of which are complex laminated plastics that are physically non-recyclable. The IWMA members do not export mixed soft plastics to Southeast Asia or any other destination, as it carries a risk that non-recyclable plastics will be rejected by poorly regulated sorting operations and could end up as ocean debris. Instead, IWMA Members extract single polymers from the mixed recyclables and convert the sorting residues, including non-recyclable plastics, to a fuel to be used in waste to energy plants in Ireland (cement kilns and incinerators).

The plastics extracted by IWMA members from household and commercial wastes are sold as single polymer plastics and all are in high demand. After initial sorting in Material Recovery Facilities in Ireland, the vast majority of these plastics are reprocessed in Ireland and the UK. Reprocessing involves recycling the plastic for use as secondary raw materials in new products. There is no incentive for any of this material to be diverted away from recycling and dumped as it has commercial value.

Some examples of plastic recycling in Ireland include the following:

- Reprocessing of HDPE bottles (milk, shampoo, bleach, etc) to make construction pipes by two companies in Ireland: (Cherry Pipes and Condron Construction)
- Reprocessing of PET bottles and trays (mineral bottles, fruit trays, etc) to make filling for duvets, pillows, fleece jackets, etc. (Wellman International)

The NUIG/UL report has made an incorrect link between the export of single polymer plastics with high demand from Ireland to the UK for reprocessing, with the export of low

grade, low demand mixed plastics from the UK to Southeast Asia. There is no link between these quite different materials and there has been no evidence presented by the authors to support the study's conclusion that plastic waste collected for recycling in Ireland has ended up in the ocean. We ask that the study be withdrawn, revised, and reissued after the authors carry out the appropriate research into the waste management system in Ireland.

Ireland's waste management sector is delivering for households and businesses, both in terms of the environmental agenda and in value for money terms. Ireland is currently highly compliant with EU Waste Directives with 42% of municipal waste is now recycled. Over the next 5 years the waste sector in Ireland is committed to increasing municipal waste recycling rates from 42% to the EU target of 55% by 2025. In addition, the sector intends to develop more indigenous recycling and recovery infrastructure to process and treat all wastes collected from households and businesses.

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