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“We Europeans should set a good example”

Frankfurt, 7 June 2019 – Interview with Dr. Christoph Steger, CSO
ENGEL AUSTRIA GmbH.

The EU is pushing ahead with circular economy and recycling. In other parts of the world that’s not the case. Does it make sense then to press ahead at full steam?

Dr. Christoph Steger: It definitely makes sense. Someone must begin for others to follow. We Europeans should set a good example. The companies of our sector have worldwide networks today. This is a tremendous opportunity to make a start in Europe and contribute to improving the situation in other regions such as Asia, for instance, by setting up collection systems based on the model of Germany. As a single enterprise we have limited impact. For this reason, we have joined the New Plastics Economy initiative of the Ellen MacArthur Foundation. It also cross-links players all over the world and creates greater recognition of our common objective. However, in Europe we still have great optimisation potential. There are still many European countries in which plastics refuse is deposited. This is an enormous wastage of raw materials.

In your view, what is the greatest challenge?

Dr. Christoph Steger: In order to really push ahead with circular economy, we need an accurately sorted collection system. Currently it does not exist. It is not enough to put all plastic waste in the *Gelber Sack*, the German “green-point” recycling bag. Regulation about what belongs in the bag and what does not differs from municipality to municipality. That means, plastics are collected which cannot be recycled together due to their chemical and physical properties, and often the result is a low-quality product. To manufacture high-quality products – and this must be the goal in the sense of protection of

resources – the same kind of plastics must be recycled together, and to achieve that they must be collected separately in the first place.

How do you feel about chemical recycling?

Dr. Christoph Steger: Chemical recycling is still in its infancy. A start has been made and the first plants have commenced operations. This is a field that mainly concerns raw material manufacturers. But here too certain pre-sorting is required to ensure adequate chemical recycling.

Is circular economy an innovations driver?

Dr. Christoph Steger: It is a strong innovations driver and a chance for European companies to maintain a pioneering position as technology leaders. Thus, Industrie 4.0, for example, is an important innovator in the field of circular economy. At K 2019, we will show how raw material deviations can be reliably offset by means of intelligent assistance systems when processing recyclate. This innovation makes it possible to use recyclates for a wider range of purposes and for higher-quality applications. Another example is thermoplastic-based composite lightweight construction, increasingly in demand with automotive and aircraft manufacturers, because in future it will allow for fibre composite components to be recycled. At K, we will show an application in this field. In the first place, circular economy is the commitment to save precious resources and to prevent disposal of plastics in the nature. That's why we need innovative ideas and solutions, and it is important for all stakeholders to act in concert. I believe in the snowball principle.

Is the K-show a right platform to get this snowball rolling?

Dr. Christoph Steger: The K is definitely a good platform to show what is technically feasible today and what will be possible in a few years. At the end of the day, we must not forget that the K-show is a trade fair, and that enterprises from the plastics sector alone cannot get a cycle going. It is crucial to take disposers and above all consumers on board.

Packaging materials make up the largest part of plastics waste. Do we have too much packaging? Are there any alternatives?

Dr. Christoph Steger: Packaging material serves to protect a product so that it is not damaged on its way from the manufacturer via the retailer to the consumer. In practice, other factors also play a role, such as marketing and logistics. For instance, toothpaste tubes can be stacked more easily in boxes. It should indeed be examined more closely if these outer packs are necessary. As in the case of toothpaste, this concerns not just plastics but also carton overpacks. The use of alternatives, that means alternative packaging materials,

must be weighed carefully. Particularly in the food sector plastics packaging is the most efficient –with regard to energy and material balance as well as manufacture and transportation. The current trend of many consumers towards glass packaging has the opposite effect of what should be achieved.

What is the role of politics when it comes to implementing a circular economy in Europe?

Dr. Christoph Steger: Politics play a decisive role. Up till now, it has not fulfilled it very well. Banning plastics products does not support a circular economy. If you ban plastic drinking straws, the market will offer paper straws with many chemical additives and a worse CO2 balance. This is exactly what circular economy is trying to avoid. Moreover, by prohibiting products, politics contribute to further emotionalisation of the plastics issue instead of engaging more intensively in educating consumers.

What exactly do you hope for?

Dr. Christoph Steger: In practical terms, we wish to have measures which are better tailored to the situation in our country. One of the highest priorities here in Austria and also in Germany is to increase recycling capacities and to ensure that recyclates can be utilised more widely. In addition, it is important to re-define regulation of those products which may be made from processed plastics refuse and which may not. In the fields of food packaging or medical technology, recyclate bans make sense, but not for garbage bins, for example. Moreover, we must make efforts to ensure that the burning of plastic waste to generate energy and heat loses its bad image.

In our world, plastics are indispensable. The downside is the littering. Carelessly discarded plastics products condense to form thick carpets, not just on rivers and seas, but also on land. A complete circular economy could prevent this evil and put the focus back on the benefits of plastics. In order for this to be a success, we all need to work together: processors, raw material manufacturers, mechanical engineers and recyclers, but also brand owners, end consumers and politicians.

VDMA will shine the spotlight on circular economy at the leading K 2019 trade fair in Düsseldorf in October and show how closed loops can work effectively. Throughout the process, stakeholders will be having their say in a series of interviews in the run-up to this international industry event.

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P l a s t i c s s h a p e t h e f u t u r e

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About VDMA Plastics and Rubber Machinery

More than 230 companies are members of the association, covering more than 90 percent of the industry's production activities in Germany. Ten percent of our member companies come from Austria, Switzerland and France. The German member companies represent sales of EUR 7 billion in core machinery and EUR 10 billion including peripheral technology. Every fourth plastics machine produced in the world comes from Germany; the export rate is 70 percent. Ulrich Reifenhäuser, Member of the Management Board of the Reifenhäuser Group, is the chairman of the association.