

Oil based plastics will end up in the museum

Interview with François de Bie after 100 days as chairman of European Bioplastics



Question: The use of bioplastics in Europe is forecast to increase five-fold from 2011-2016. What kind of numbers are we looking at?

FdB: This 500% growth is truly explosive. By 2016 more than 600,000 tonnes per year of biodegradable plastics will be able to be produced, including well-known bioplastics such as PLA, compostable starch blends and thermoplastic polyesters. Biobased (but not biodegradable) plastics for durable applications, such as Bio-PE volumes will reach 240,000 tonnes per year, while Bio-PET volumes will be much larger still.

Question: What are the main drivers behind this predicted boom?

FdB: Consumers want to adopt a more sustainable life style and small and big companies alike are adapting their products to meet these consumer demands. Globally we are moving towards a circular economy where reduction of CO₂ emissions and making more efficient use of the limited resources is important. Biobased plastics will play a very important role in achieving those targets.

Question: Is the industry in Europe equipped and ready to take on this surge in demand for bioplastics? Are there any technical limitations in the production processes that must be overcome?

FdB: Technically Europe is very well established to take advantage of these growth opportunities and in fact the majority of bioplastics research and development is done in Europe. With advanced agricultural practices we are also very well-positioned to produce the biomass needed for the bioplastics industry.

Unfortunately “Brussels” and the various European governments are not creating the right incentives to actually enable significant local production of bioplastics in Europe. For this reason many big companies are considering setting up production plants in the Americas or the Asia/Pacific area.

Question: As the newly-elected Chairman of European Bioplastics —after your first 100 days — what do you think will be the biggest challenges that you will encounter during your tenure?

FdB: One of the biggest challenges will be to further inform the general public, brand owners, NGO’s and government organisations about the benefits of bioplastics. Many misconceptions are still present in the market.

During the first 100 day’s a lot of effort has gone into enabling the EuBP organisation to become more active, more visible and more influential at the EU level in Brussels. We have just recently put

the right “Brussels” framework in place. Brussels and all the bioplastics relevant regulations will remain a key focus for 2014 and beyond.

Question: What are you planning to do that is different from your chairman predecessors, and what will you continue to pursue?

FdB: Andy Sweetman and the previous board have done a great job transforming EuBP into a more professionally organised structure, which serves the needs for biobased and biodegradable bioplastics. The strategic direction of EuBP will remain unchanged, but with the new board we will challenge more than before the EuBP organisation and our members to actively participate internally and externally on the different key questions that surround bioplastics. We will define very clear and visible EuBP positions with respect to topics such as land use for bioplastics, the plastic bag ban and how to assess the sustainability of bioplastics.

Question: You mentioned the General Public... Are you planning campaigns to inform the end-consumers? This seems necessary as many consumers don't know anything about bioplastics, and proper information could initiate or support a demand driven market.

FdB: We can only reach the general public by addressing and informing the politicians, the brand owners and the daily media. This is where we will get much better coverage than we have had until now, because we will start making more clear and bold statements that will be more easily understood and picked up by the media. Just as an example: the land used for bioplastics compared with land used for agricultural practices is like comparing the size of a cherry tomato to the Eiffel tower.

Question: How do you see the development of the membership of European Bioplastics?

FdB: Over the last 10 years the number of members has steadily grown. With our ambition to be leading the bioplastics discussions on an EU level and combined with the fact that bioplastics will become more mainstream, we foresee a rapid growth in the number of member companies. We will also be organising more round tables and workshops that will make it more valuable than before for companies to become members and actively participate in these events.

Question: Is it possible that all of our plastics will be bio-based in the near future?

FdB: In less than 100 years from now oil-based plastics will be only found in the “museum of pollution”, next to the steam train, the CKF cooled refrigerator and my grandmothers coal powered cooking stove.

Question: Is there solid evidence that supports people's concerns about competition for arable land?

FdB: Recent scientific data show that bioplastics only account for 0.006% of the total available biomass usage. And another recent study by the World Bank shows that use of biomass for biofuels and bioplastics, contrary to what most people think, actually helps to REDUCE food prices! So bioplastics do not compete for land and do not drive up food prices.

Question: This autumn and winter you're speaking at different conferences on the significance of bio-based building blocks as part of global sustainability. How significant will bioplastics be to Europe's drive for sustainability?

FdB: Bioplastics will help reduce our carbon footprint and hence will help minimise the global warming issue. With the multiple end-of-life options that bioplastics offer, it will also be possible to significantly reduce landfill.

Question: What kinds of legislation do you think are needed from leaders in Europe to open up a larger share of the market to bioplastics? Would it not benefit them to do so in terms of meeting their own targets on sustainability?

FdB: In order for bioplastics production in Europe to grow significantly the European leaders need to clearly recognise and support the full potential of bioplastics. This will help drive consumer acceptance and market demand. First generation biomass, locally grown in Europe, needs to be available at prices that are at least as good as those offered in, for example, South East Asia. Europe has a very long agricultural history and the crop yield per hectare is amongst the highest in the world. Europe needs to capitalise on that asset as it will help to generate jobs in rural areas and in the high added-value plastics industry.

Question: What other activities do you have on your agenda?

FdB: I work for Corbion Purac as a marketing director for PLA, which is already more than a full-time job. Besides spending time with my wife and 2 sons, I also like to stay active, so I do a lot of running and cycling. Perhaps next year I will participate in the Berlin marathon.

The interview was conducted by Nick Hawker, Founder at EcoChem, within the framework of the EcoChem Conference, to be held 19-21 November in Basel, Switzerland (For free entry visit www.ecochemex.com). A short version was published in issue 05/2013 of bioplastics MAGAZINE

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