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EPS transport packaging gains key support in UN sustainability study

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REPRINTS

Heide-Anderson

Ottawa, Ontario — The expanded polystyrene industry has scored a win in the United Nations plastics treaty talks, with an updated U.N. science report stating EPS transport packaging is an "in practice, at-scale" recycled material like PET bottles.

That designation for EPS in storage and transportation packaging is in a new U.N. Environment Programme science report released for the latest round of treaty talks, held in Canada April 23-29.

The new listing could potentially help the industry keep that type of EPS packaging, frequently used in business-to-business shipping, off lists of problematic plastic applications the talks are expected to consider going forward.

EPS industry officials participating in the Canada negotiations said their material was the only new plastics application added to the updated UNEP science report list, joining PET

and high density polyethylene bottles, HDPE rigids, polypropylene bottles and larger-size PE monomaterial films used in business-to-business packaging, such as pallet wrap.

"This could be a tipping point" in arguments around recyclability of EPS transport packaging, said Chresten Heide-Anderson, vice president of the European Manufacturers of Expanded Polystyrene Association, or EUMEPS.

The April 16 UNEP science report is an advisory document for countries to use as they write the treaty. It does not carry regulatory weight on its own.

But how the treaty considered EPS packaging, including transport packaging, was one of the industry's biggest concerns in the talks so far, said Betsy Bowers, executive director of the EPS Industry Alliance in the U.S., in an interview at the talks in Ottawa.

Industry ‘pleased'

Having the UNEP science report now include it on a list of applications deemed successfully recycled is welcome, she said.

"Yes, it's the biggest concern [we had in the talks] because it's not true that it's not recyclable, and that was the assumption being made," said Bowers, who is also spokesperson for the Global EPS Sustainability Alliance, an umbrella group of EPS associations on five continents. "Letting them know that it's recyclable was a challenge because people are kind of resistant to that information being true."

"We are very pleased by UNEP's recognition that EPS transport packaging is recycled in practice and at scale," Bowers said in a statement, calling the new designation "a testament to the commitment and dedication of UNEP to comprehensively address plastic pollution."

The UNEP science report said it was applying definitions under the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's New Plastics Economy project, which says that for recycling to be considered viable "in practice and at scale" it needs a 30 percent recycling rate in multiple regions covering at least 400 million people.

"In practice, at-scale recycling in specific countries is limited," the UNEP report said. "While many polymers may be recyclable in theory, only a handful of packaging formats have

been demonstrated to be recycled in practice and at scale in specific countries and regions."

GESA officials said EPS transport packaging, including insulated and protective packaging used in business or retail settings and collected there, has recycling rates above 30 percent in North America, Europe and parts of Asia.

EPS transport packaging is also commonly used for shipping vaccines, household appliances and fish.

"Based on other sources and industry data, we can actually document that we are recycled at scale in 39 countries on five continents for more than 4.2 billion people, for the transport packaging," Heide-Anderson said. "That's the material for the second highest coverage for recycling globally."

Other plastics fall short

The UNEP report, however, said that other types of "business-to-consumer" EPS and extruded polystyrene packaging don't meet those recyclability definitions.

As well, it listed PET trays and thermoforms, PP non-bottle packaging, consumer polystyrene packaging and all flexible packaging, except business-to-business PE, as not meeting that EMF definition.

"Most other packaging formats and polymers have not been shown to be recycled in practice and at scale … even if they might technically be recyclable," UNEP said, calling plastics on that list potentially "the most problematic packaging formats."

The science report is likely to be used by countries as they negotiate how the treaty should address problematic plastic applications, often defined as hard-to-recycle or prone to leaking into the environment. Some countries want the treaty to include lists of such applications to restrict, but others prefer a more nationally driven approach.

Keeping EPS packaging off any problematic lists was a key focus of EPS industry efforts at earlier rounds of treaty talks.

Some government statistics point to much less consumer recycling for EPS. Figures from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency say that only about 6 percent of consumer PS packaging, which includes EPS, is recycled.

Since 2019, 10 U.S. states have passed bans on EPS products including food service packaging, packing peanuts and nonmedical disposable foam coolers. More than 50 member of Congress introduced legislation last year for a national ban.

‘Significant' impact from treaty

In Ottawa, the GESA alliance said it was advocating for the agreement to include rules for extended producer responsibility systems, which require companies to pay fees on their packaging to help finance recycling.

It also said it wanted chemical transparency rules in the treaty for plastics and alternative materials, arguing that EPS has "demonstrated its safety."

How the treaty addresses chemicals of concern in plastics is also expected to be a contentious point as countries begin to negotiate details of any agreement.

Bowers said GESA wants the treaty to use a risk-based assessment of health concerns like U.S. regulatory agencies, rather than a hazard-based approach that some countries and groups want.

One member of the GESA alliance, Becher Townsend, executive director of Expanded Polystyrene Australia, said the treaty is having a "very significant positive impact" on the industry.

"I think it's significantly changing the way in which the sector is operating," he said. "I come from Southeast Asia, and there's no doubt that the vast majority of my members are absolutely committed to ensuring that they're more responsible about the way in which they manage their product.

"This whole extended producer responsibility, this EPR model, has been absolutely embraced in Australia because the simple reality is, people realize that if they don't do something responsible about it, then they will be banned," Townsend said. "We can talk about whether the treaty is going to work. … The reality is that what it's forced industry to do is realize they have to do something."