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Despite the progress of lightweighting and the effect this has on the metal requirements of canmakers, tonnages of steel for packaging in Europe are currently stable, having grown in recent years.

Data released by the Association of European Producers of Steel for Packaging (APEAL) recorded the 2009 total for the European Union region as 3.4 billion tonnes, which rose to 3.6bn tonnes by 2012.

The popularity of steel packaging cannot be measured just by increases in tonnages though, due to today's lighter cans requiring less metal, explains Alexander Mohr, secretary general at APEAL: "Tonnages are currently stable. The Eurostat official data, which refers to the amount of packaging put on and used in the market, shows that volumes of steel packaging have in fact steadily increased since the 2009 market dip that affected all packaging materials. And lightweighting means there are even more pieces of packaging on the market."

It's important for industry bodies such as APEAL, which comprises four packaging steel producers – ArcelorMittal, Tata Steel Packaging, ThyssenKrupp Rasselstein and US Steel Košice – to ensure customers and consumers fully understand the implications of lightweighting, in terms of both the relationship between tonnages and can shipments, and the environment and efficiency benefits.

"Lightweighting of steel for packaging in general offers numerous benefits throughout all relevant supply chains and the increased sustainability value makes brand owners increasingly eager to adopt steel as a packaging format," says Mohr. "These benefits must also be seen holistically, incorporating and appreciating the demands for more environmentally-friendly materials from end users who are more perceptive to sustainability messages than ever.

"It is obviously important for tinsplate manufacturers and canmakers to show how the can is an eco-efficient option when compared to other packaging formats, and lightweighting has a major part to play.

"Indeed we have just previewed our latest research into the eco-efficiency of the steel can which demonstrates that it is still one of the best eco-performers and the most eco-efficient rigid packaging option by far.

"One of the conclusions of this study, which was carried out by the Dutch consultancy TNO, indicated the extent to which increased lightweighting and greater recycling rates will improve the

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Steeled for action

APEAL's Alexander Mohr believes steel will have a renaissance in the coming years and is perfectly positioned in Europe's policies for a resource efficient economy. Daniel Searle reports

eco-efficiency of steel packaging further. This is something we as tinplate manufacturers will be taking on board."

While research has proven that steel packaging has strong sustainability credentials, it's important for APEAL to ensure this message is issued and understood in a consistently competitive market.

"Times are still challenging for us," says Mohr, "and it's a case of going beyond delivering high quality steel for packaging to customers, to also informing stakeholders about the true environmental benefits of steel packaging in a closed loop recycling society.

"Steel sometimes suffers from certain misconceptions compared to other materials and we are working hard this year to invite all stakeholders to 'take a fresh look' at steel for packaging and redress that imbalance. We're opening up new dialogue channels, such as the 'Steel for Packaging' stand at the recent Interpack show.

"Indeed, one of the pieces of research we presented at Interpack showed that a material's visual appeal and perceived green credentials often have more influence than a format's real properties and recycling rate. So we still have some work to do."

As well as communicating with



Alexander Mohr: "The steel can is the most eco-efficient rigid packaging option by far"

customers and consumers, there is another sector that holds influence over the packaging which APEAL is engaged with – those in charge of regulations and legislation.

"We continue to represent the European steel for packaging industry to the European institutions in the context of policy developments," says Mohr, "particularly in relation to the review of recycling rates targets in the European Packaging & Packaging Waste Directive. We plan to strengthen our work with other steel and metal associations, both on a European and a global scale."

While the environmental performance of steel packaging is one of its key strengths, canstock producers are innovating in other areas outside of lightweighting – including meeting the growing demand for consumer

interactivity and other methods of making individual products stand out, says Mohr:

"Increasing interactivity is an area where brands are focusing their attention in order to ensure consumers are receiving a post-purchase interaction with a product. Steel's smooth surface is ideal for easily applying new techniques that enhance brand experience and increase consumer interaction, like fluorescent coatings, thermochromic and thermodynamic inks, and even 'augmented reality' codes.

"On shelf brand differentiation is also high on the priority list, for luxury brands that use steel packaging as a promotional tool. The industry is being driven by more aesthetic demands such as unique shaping to really stand out on an increasingly busy shelf."

And while steel packaging has the qualities to meet the demands of high-end products, it's the robustness of tinplate which will see cans increasingly used to combat a growing concern – food waste.

"The biggest challenge for the packaging industry comes in the form of food waste," explains Mohr. "This is an area that concerns food and drink manufacturers and governments and the steel food can, with its total barrier and long shelf life, will have an important role to play in the coming years.

"Many countries are already seeking to reduce food waste through a variety of measures involving grocery retailers and food and drink manufacturers. On a European scale, the European Commission is currently working with stakeholders, experts and member states to provide an analysis on how to reduce food waste without compromising food safety and discussing options for EU actions.

"The EU objective is to halve the disposal of edible food waste in the EU by 2020. In this environment steel, with all of its inherent preservative qualities, will play a valuable role. The demand for single serve portions is also likely to increase, and given the flexibility in packaging sizes already offered by the steel packaging community this is likely to be a core area of development across the packaging market.

"I believe that steel also has an important role to play in improving the global efficiency of food resources, and global food safety in the light of recent contamination scandals. It will, I think, have a renaissance in the coming years and is perfectly positioned in the European policies for a resource efficient economy."