

Steel packaging industry leading the way to circular economy

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Steel is a perfect packaging material for Europe's circular economy writes Alexander Mohr.



My association, APEAL, which is made up of the four major producers of steel for packaging in Europe - ArcelorMittal, Tata Steel Packaging, thyssenkrupp Packaging Steel, US Steel Košice - fully supports the European Commission's circular economy package proposal.

By catapulting sustainability, recycling and the entire culture of how Europe uses its natural resources into focus, we believe the package can be a catalyst for change. For environmental reasons the need for change is beyond dispute.

But the Commission has also recognised the outstanding economic opportunity it presents. Changing the way we use natural resources, manufacture goods and keep resources in the loop through recycling could be a catalyst for greater economic sustainability too.

Despite this, there is understandable apprehension, scepticism and debate about the package and, more widely, questions are being asked about how realistic the recycling targets within the package are.

Here at APEAL we recognise that moving closer towards a circular economy is more realistic than many think - and that the steel for packaging industry is leading the way.

The recycling targets proposed for steel within the circular economy package - 75 per cent by 2025 and 85 per cent by 2030 - are ambitious but achievable. The average steel packaging recycling rate in Europe is already 75 per cent.

Countries like Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands recycle even more than 90 per cent of the steel packaging they use. And a split recycling target for metals will foster greater understanding of the recycling performance of individual metals.

Steel, of course, has an inherent advantage over competing packaging materials. Magnetic properties make it easy and economical to separate and it can be recycled infinitely with no loss of quality.

Steel scrap is an inherent part of the production process for new steel, every single steel plant in Europe is also a recycling plant, saving resources, energy and emissions by recycling steel in a simple and efficient process. What's needed now - to drive wider use of sustainable packaging materials like steel - is the political impetus the circular economy package will bring.

If approved in, or close to, its current form, the package will push national governments, spurred on by the need to meet recycling rate targets, to improve national collection systems, increase recycling processes and encourage manufacturers to incorporate sustainable materials into their design and production processes.

Given ever increasing consumer interest in sustainability, brands will be keen to accentuate their environmental credentials within marketing and promotional activities. When market demand takes over then circular economics can really begin to take effect. And our vision for a closed steel loop can start to become reality.

About the author

Alexander Mohr is Secretary General of APEAL, the Association of European Producers of Steel for Packaging

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