

Survey finds increase in the recycling of plastics

According to Plastics SA's third annual survey of the plastics recycling industry in South Africa, the recycling of plastics has shown a year-on-year increase in the total tonnage being converted since the 2009 survey.

In 2011 South Africa had 196 plastic recyclers who collectively recycled 245 696 tons of plastics. This is 1.6 percent more than in 2010, whereas the virgin consumption decreased by 3 percent in the same period, from 1340 to 1300 thousand tons," said Plastics SA's executive director, Anton Hanekom.

A large percentage(76.7 percent) of the plastic that was recycled in South Africa came from packaging. Explained Hanekom: "Out of the 245 696 tons of plastics that were recycled, 188 466 tons were packaging." Another major contributor to plastics being diverted away from the country's landfills was the 1.3 million PET bottles that were recycled. An overall plastics recycling rate of 18.9 percent was achieved in 2011.

For the first time since the annual survey was introduced three years ago, 1233 tons of multi-layer materials were also included. "There is huge environmental pressure to find applications for multi-layer materials. To date, polywood and wood composites have provided excellent recycling opportunities for multi-layer material. Since May 2012, roof tiles are being manufactured from multi-layer plastics, but this will only be reflected in next year's figures," Hanekom explained.

The largest growth in plastics recycling for the year 2010-11 came from post-consumer recyclables. Thanks to improved separation-at-source initiatives and investments made by recyclers to improve the washing and drying facilities at their plants, more plastics were collected from households and landfills than in previous years. "Almost 70 percent of all recyclables were sourced from post-consumer sources versus the 46.8 percent in 2010," Hanekom said.

Job creation

The formal employment figure in the plastics recycling industry increased by 5.2 percent to 5062 jobs in 2011. It is also estimated that 40 950 informal jobs were created in the collection industry (based on 60kg/person/day). Contract workers are mainly employed as sorters at the recyclers and were only 7.2 percent of the total formal jobs in 2011.

However, the study has also revealed that rising electricity and labour costs are hindering the growth of the plastics recycling industry in South Africa. "Materials are still not sufficiently sorted at the waste management companies, which necessitates the need for manual sorting at the recycler operations. In addition, 29 percent of a recycler's operating costs are made up of water and electricity charges, and these costs increase during winter months," said Hanekom.

Plastic waste for the generation for energy

Looking ahead, the survey predicts that the industry will be utilising plastic waste for the generation for energy. "Extended producer responsibility has put pressure on the industry to find ways of recycling traditionally non-recyclable and difficult-to-recycle materials. Creating energy from these materials offers an ideal solution and exciting prospects for future growth.

Although market economics will protect the mechanical recycling market due to the fact that the fuel market cannot pay the same amount of money for recyclable waste, the increased demand for plastics waste may also have a positive result on the collection, baling and transport costs of recyclable plastics waste.

"Recycled plastic is fast gaining a reputation for being strong, durable and versatile. With the growth in the market for recycled plastics and the wide variety of products manufactured from recycled plastics finding wide public acceptance, we are anticipating an overall plastics packaging recycling rate of 35 percent by 2015. If the updated statistics for 2011 are anything to go by, we are well underway to reaching this goal if the current growth rates are maintained."

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