The transition towards a circular packaging economy is high on the agenda, not only in the corporate world, but also among policy makers. European frontrunner in this area is Belgium, with its unique organisation for commercial and industrial (C&I) packaging – Valipac – allowing the country to already meet and even exceed the latest recycling targets today. ‘Let’s act together for a circular economy’ is not an empty slogan at Valipac, but an ambitious objective.

While the other EU-member states slowly begin to set up a scheme for C&I packaging, the Belgian system was installed 25 years ago. Since then, Valipac is the accredited body for extended producer responsibility for C&I packaging in Belgium. It works according to a mutualistic and participatory model, based on consultation between the various stakeholders. Trade federations, companies and employers’ organisations all are part of its decision-making bodies.

By 31 December 2025, at least 65% by weight of all European packaging waste must be recycled, increasing to at least 70% by 31 December 2030. The Extended Producer Responsibility imposes producers to design their products from the most eco-friendly materials available and in such a way as to optimise their collection, but also to ensure the processing of their products with special attention to recycling.

Contrary to other European countries, Belgium has established two separate EPR-organisations for packaging waste, one for household packaging and another for C&I packaging. Only a few Belgian companies can comply individually with their EPR obligations. “This small minority is well organised to do so,” explains Valipac’s Managing Director Francis Huysman. “But the majority of the companies has delegated this responsibility to Valipac, by paying a fee. We cover about 85% of the market.” The remaining ‘free-riders’ aren’t working according to the legal terms and can be fined. Most of them however are small companies with very low amounts of packaging.

© Valipac - Francis Huysman, Valipac's Managing Director

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"Until recently, we focussed on registering the C&I packaging placed on the market and collected in Belgium, and encouraging selective collection from companies," says Francis Huysman. "In more than twenty-five years, we succeeded in raising the recycling percentage of C&I packaging from 74 to 92.4%, making Belgium the leading nation in Europe. Currently, 61.5% of the plastic packaging gets recycled, 91.1% of the metal, 98% of the wood and even 100% of the paper and cardboard. In this model, the recycling of plastic packaging is mainly done outside Europe, for instance in Turkey and some South-East Asiatic countries.

Boost recycling in Europe

“However, this model is not sustainable. On the one hand, because the export of waste materials means a loss of secondary raw materials and added value for European industry. On the other hand, because it makes traceability and control of effective recycling more difficult. That is why we are evolving towards a circular model in which most of the recycling process and use of the recyclate remains on European soil. It is important to find European companies interested in the processing and reusing of collected packaging waste.”

To get a detailed view on the exact current destination of the Belgian commercial & industrial packaging waste, Valipac set up agreements with the largest waste traders, the companies who purchase, sell and ship waste to different destinations for recycling. These contracts with the traders, in combination with the information provided with the waste collectors, generated a detailed mapping of the final destination of our packaging waste. “Currently, Valipac is the first organisation in Europe to have a clear overview of the final destinations of 99% of the industrial plastic packaging waste and 95% of the paper and cardboard packaging waste from Belgian companies. Together with SGS, Valipac performs audits at recyclers where Belgian C&I packaging waste is treated in order to verify that the packaging waste is effectively and entirely recycled in compliance with environmental, safety and social standards. Since autumn 2023, companies that have their packaging waste collected by waste management companies affiliated to Valipac, have the possibility to obtain a report from their waste management companies indicating the final destination and the level of compliance of the recyclers who process their C&I plastic packaging waste.”

Partnerships

Overall, companies are continuously sorting more and better, but there still remains some room for improvement. Through profound analysis of the waste production and the sorting behaviour of more than 200.000 Belgian companies, Valipac pinpoints the waste streams that require extra initiatives to create further awareness. “We promote the principle of circularity in Europe with a circular model in which the focus is on the co-responsibility of all stakeholders,” Francis Huysman explains. “We no longer only register the C&I packaging placed on the market and collected in Belgium. We are seeking and entering into partnerships with new stakeholders across Europe: traders and recycling companies will have to cooperate in full transparency in order to be able to find out where the C&I packaging waste ends up and how much of it is recycled. From the packaging producers, we will collect information on how much of this new raw material is converted back into packaging.”

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Incentive

Starting in 2022, Valipac supports companies which adopt sustainable packaging with an incentive and takes herewith the lead of packaging circularity in Europe. “We pay our clients a bonus of 50 euros per tonne of post-consumer recyclate incorporated into their C&I plastic packaging. The only conditions are that the packaging is used for goods that are sold in Belgium and that the percentage of recycled content is certified. The packaging may be produced internationally, as long as the percentage of post-consumer recyclate incorporated in the packaging is proven. The minimum requirement is set on 30%. Logically, given that today only a handful of packaging producers offer such solutions.”

myRecycledContent.be

The launch of the new bonus-system was accompanied by the launch of the platform myRecycledContent.be, where supply and demand can find each other. “Even today, few companies are aware that films with recyclate are equivalent to virgin films,” says Francis Huysman. “Unknown is unloved, so there is no demand for such solutions. As a result, few packaging producers are interested in investing in production lines to process recyclate. We want to eliminate this chicken-and-egg story by sharing knowledge and raising awareness, but also by offering a tool where parties can find each other. Doing so, we took another step towards a European approach, because logically the website isn’t used by only Belgian players.” In collaboration with its partner organisations in France, Germany and the United Kingdom (the initiative isn’t limited to EU-members), Valipac also started www.myRecycledContent.eu. This project aims to bring together suppliers of plastic C&I packaging containing recycled material on a single European platform and to establish a common database, without any commercial or marketing purpose.

Company specific projects

Valipac also stimulates and assists in company specific projects to use packaging with as few difficult to recycle additives as possible. “For example, we were able to convince a brick producer to reduce the number of pigments in his plastic packaging (shrink hoods). The use of the pigments resulted in a downgrading of the recyclate. With the new solution – only a small sleeve with printed pigments – most of the packaging can be reused to produce new transparent packaging.”

Valipac
Avenue Reine Astrid, 59A bte 11
B-1780 Wemmel
Tel.: +32 (0)2 456 83 10
Email : info@valipac.be
https://www.valipac.be/