UNILEVER'S POSITION ON BIOPLASTICS

Background

Bio-plastics are a form of plastic made from vegetable oil, corn starch, sugar cane, sugar beet, algae or cellulose - rather than fossil fuel plastics which are derived from petroleum. Although these are renewable sources, they are not necessarily sustainable.

Context

Today, most of the feedstock used to manufacture bio-plastics come from staple food crops, and although technology and feedstock are advancing, increased demand could have a significant impact on food prices and availability. This is an issue which could be compounded by more and more industry sectors such as automotive, electronics and consumer goods, incorporating increasing volumes of bio-plastics into their portfolios.

Unilever's position

The impact of waste packaging on the environment is a key pillar of the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan. We aim to halve the waste associated with our products by 2020. Our highest priority actions are to reduce, reuse and recycle our packaging waste, including plastics. Coupled with this is our ambition to increase the amount of recycled content we use in our packaging and increase the volume of renewable materials used in our portfolio.

Unilever is engaged in a medium-term (2015–20) programme with several bio-plastics suppliers to explore new technologies and next-generation materials which are sustainably sourced and take into account social, economic and environmental factors.
Unilever is on the Steering Team of the Bio Feedstock Alliance (BFA) led by WWF. The primary focus of BFA is on guiding the responsible selection and harvesting of feedstock used to make plastics from agricultural materials. As the development of these materials has grown, so has their opportunity to address their potential impacts on land use, food security and biodiversity. The BFA brings together leading experts from industry, academia and civil society to develop and support informed science, collaboration, education and innovation to help guide the evaluation and development of bio-plastic feedstock.

Unilever believes that bio-plastics must show an equivalent or better life-cycle impact versus current petrochemical-derived plastics. The use of bio-plastics should not lead to competition for land needed to grow staple food crops. And, bio-plastics should not have a negative impact on the global recycling infrastructure via contaminating traditional materials.