

The Natural Step's Commentary on VinylPlus Progress Report for 2017

The Natural Step acts as an external advisor, stakeholder intermediary and capacity builder to VinylPlus. Here we comment on some key themes that have emerged from our understanding of VinylPlus activities during 2017, our direct engagement supporting its roadmap, and our reflection on the increasingly *sustainability-driven* market context in which industry must operate.

Plastics in the Spotlight

Society's (unsustainable) use of plastics was in the spotlight in 2017 – for example, plastics in the ocean, single-use plastic bags, calls for streamlining plastics in packaging and dialogue surrounding the forthcoming EU Strategy for Plastics in the Circular Economy. Even if PVC is mainly used in durable applications, this debate about getting plastics 'under control' is also relevant for VinylPlus as a successful programme of action from the plastics industry. For example, the VinylPlus recycling volumes in 2017 have now reached almost 80% of the 2020 target. This should be seen as serious steps toward the larger aspiration of a fully controlled-loop management regime for PVC. Overall, we think VinylPlus is engaging stakeholders constructively on the issues around PVC and taking up its responsibility via the voluntary commitment.

Sharing Lessons on Roadmaps for Sustainably Managed Materials

VinylPlus gained further positive recognition for its achievements in 2017 and is increasingly seen as a model for other plastics and material value chains to learn from. If there is one area where we'd like to encourage VinylPlus to speak louder, it is on promoting its vision for sustainable chemical and material management. Year on year improvement and activity is positive but it is a clear understanding of what ultimately needs to be achieved for PVC to secure its place in a sustainable society that defines the focus of the roadmap. This point should not be lost when sharing lessons as this is one of the key strengths of VinylPlus' approach. All material value chains need to follow a similar journey to understand the scientific requirements for a sustainable society and then work together to overcome their own set of challenges.

Tackling Trade-offs in the Circular Economy – Legacy Additives

VinylPlus has been affected by the policy debate about legacy additives where different goals are pitted against each other – circular economy and resource efficiency on one hand and management of chemical substances on the other. This uncertainty is a potential barrier to investment in recycling infrastructure and the uptake of recycled materials. Treating issues in isolation from each other misses the need to work toward a common vision of sustainability, taking all issues into account and working on multiple fronts simultaneously to make genuine improvements over time. Pragmatic solutions are needed, and we believe it is important for VinylPlus to continually advocate for the best outcomes to move toward its vision for a sustainably managed material flow for PVC. This 'back-casting' mindset is essential when dealing holistically with the trade-offs in the circular economy.

Proposals for Recycling Rigid PVC Containing Legacy Additives

In light of the questions around this particular trade-off we were asked by the VinylPlus Controlled-Loop Committee to provide direct input on 'developing science-based proposals for managing legacy additives in rigid PVC' using The Natural Step Framework. We conducted an analysis using sustainability principles to evaluate the issue and to consider the best current waste management option for rigid PVC articles when 'back casting' from full alignment with sustainability principles in the longer term. We have since published our statement and recommendations to VinylPlus.

These are shared publicly as part of the wider discussion about PVC and sustainability (available at www.thenaturalstep.org/PVC).

Walking and Talking the Talk

VinylPlus has become an important speaker for industry sustainability, even beyond Europe. The 2017 VinylPlus Sustainability Forum was a great success and a good example of how VinylPlus is bringing industry together, mainstreaming sustainability thinking and showing the impact of a joint commitment. With increased 'industry-level communication' there is greater onus on every actor to play their part in 'walking the talk' so there is always a consistent message regardless of who you talk to. We encourage all individual companies to continue integrating VinylPlus into company practices and communications.

VinylPlus Product Label

Greater evidence of individual company commitments is in fact beginning to show. The Natural Step wishes to acknowledge the PVC Window Profile sector for being the first to take up the VinylPlus® Product Label, and especially the front-runners undergoing certification. It is designed specifically to cover the key challenges for PVC in Europe and to stimulate progress in line with the VinylPlus roadmap. Furthermore, labelling brings with it greater transparency via third party auditing and is a signal that sustainability due diligence is cascading into the individual decisions of companies. The Natural Step hopes this stimulates other segments to take up the challenge.

Additive Sustainability Footprint

Coupled with the verification of product sustainability at company level is the assessment of additives via the work on the Additive Sustainability Footprint. The Natural Step provided guidance on methodology to ensure it is aligned with our experience with sustainability and life cycle assessment. Now the task is to proceed with assessments and clear action plans based on the results. Overall, we are pleased to see this common alignment of tools for innovation (product label + additives assessments) working toward the same reference criteria – the management of PVC products and their inputs in line with science-based principles of sustainability.

Final Thoughts

VinylPlus has, over a number of years, initiated pilot projects and invested in new ways of collaborating and systems for organising activities such as recycling. These are bearing fruit and the VinylPlus 2018 Progress Report is a good reflection of that progress. We believe VinylPlus is on track to achieve what it set out to do. Looking ahead VinylPlus should begin to consider what will be needed to take the industry commitment to the next level and go further, faster, together.



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