

TNS COMMENTARY

ON VINYLPLUS PROGRESS REPORT FOR 2015

The Natural Step acts as an external advisor, stakeholder intermediary and capacity builder to VinylPlus, advocating for sustainability. We comment here upon the big picture context, progress and forward outlook at the mid-way point in the 10-year commitment.

A landmark year in a rapidly changing world

The year 2015 will be remembered as a breakthrough year for sustainable development. It was marked by some clear shifts in public awareness, calls for action from religious, political and business leaders and two global agreements – the COP21 Paris Climate Agreement and the launch of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

These signals point toward future markets that will be very different from those of today. The world is now starting to ask for more ambition and the opportunities for sustainable innovation are growing. At the same time, scientific evidence shows we need to move faster to avoid tipping points connected to “planetary boundaries”. We risk irreversibly pushing the world into a state dangerously unfavourable to civilization. Ills such as conflict, terrorism, inequality, corruption, mass migration and social discontent are all connected with each other, with ecological instability and with markets.

What does this mean for VinylPlus? Our hope is to put progress in context, offer encouragement on the roadmap and foster a renewed sense of urgency.

Step-wise progress to future-proof industry

All industries must work toward a common goal, aligned with the scientific requirements for sustainability, and track performance to close the gap. VinylPlus is a role model in this regard, as it seeks to align the PVC industry with the necessary system conditions for a sustainable society⁴⁷. This is about future-proofing business, a point that can easily be lost in the short-term perspective. It also offers a holistic model on how to become part of the circular economy.

By 2020, VinylPlus aims to have achieved targets related to the five key sustainability challenges of PVC. The vision should be kept in mind though, and the journey must continue. Economic conditions influence the progress but we can expect those who move faster will be better positioned for tomorrow’s markets.

Our message is that VinylPlus is setting the frame for the industry of the future. We encourage all actors to use it to make coordinated step-wise progress together, to increase the pace, to ask for proactive governance, legislation and investment that supports the journey.

Reflections on progress after five years

During 2015 we provided input on VinylPlus’ mid-term review of targets. We reflected upon the working principles, whether targets are being met, the expectations of stakeholders and the existing priorities. In our report to the VinylPlus Board we stated that despite some set-backs and delays, we believe VinylPlus is on track. It is living up to original promises overall, and remains a very effective leadership vehicle for an industry facing complex sustainability issues and a lingering trust deficit. Some really tough topics are now being dealt with (at least in Europe) in a much more open, honest and sensible manner e.g. dioxins. By being open about what is known and engaging others, VinylPlus managed to get beyond the rhetoric of this emotive issue and communicate clearly the limited extent of PVC’s current contribution to this type of pollution and what can be done about it.

The review process also led to some deeper questions about the value of VinylPlus. Is this voluntary effort with all its costs and extra work really worthwhile? Is there enough enthusiasm for sustainability when industry faces tough economic challenges? Are companies using VinylPlus to deal with sustainability

⁴⁷<http://www.thenaturalstep.org/sustainability/the-system-conditions/>

questions, simply to avoid that responsibility themselves? Where is the business value for members? The conclusions remain very positive. Even if some parts of the industry and its various associations have been concerned it brings unnecessary attention to PVC, nonetheless VinylPlus is supported and seen by leaders in the industry as a serious contribution to their business strategy, values and ongoing success.

Highlights from 2015

This year's progress report reveals the extent of activity within VinylPlus, much of it at a technical level. In addition to the mid-term review we also wish to comment upon the following:

- new ground was covered during a consultation event with regulators, NGOs and academic stakeholders in Copenhagen concerning the Controlled-Loop Management of PVC and the potential for PVC in the circular economy. More such events are needed.
- the complete phase-out of lead from virgin PVC production in Europe is an historic achievement that deserves acknowledgement. It now needs to go global.
- the expansion of the PVC recycling scheme and growth in volumes show continued promise. Studies to understand waste projections and contextualize the targets added value. Questions remain about the economic impact of regulation of legacy additives on PVC recycling.

Looking ahead

We see some clear priorities that can help unlock further progress for industry via the VinylPlus programme:

Promoting innovation – More emphasis on exploring circular business models, rewarding materials innovation and stimulating design of solutions to minimize or avoid waste. Much effort has been on recycling existing waste streams but stakeholders also want to see a clear plan for the full controlled-loop management of PVC products in a circular economy (including guidance on appropriate applications).

EPDplus & measuring performance – Given the growing awareness of the effects of the use of chemicals in society, we repeat our call for “an industry-wide common process for evaluating additives (European but applicable globally) which is externally trusted”. The EPDplus concept holds promise but progress has been too slow and a credible and inclusive process is needed to take it forward.

VinylPlus Label & rewarding progress – The roll-out of the VinylPlus label for construction materials is important. Without systems to reward investment in improved performance it will not be possible for industry to credibly promote sustainable innovation.

Communication and outreach for industry sustainability – We would like to see more individual companies demonstrate progress and actively promote the goals of VinylPlus. Furthermore, we repeat our call for greater outreach, collaboration and internationalization.



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