

Dinner Remarks
by
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It's a privilege to welcome you to Washington and to this important conference. Vinyl is a key component of the global plastics market. And I'm delighted that The Society of the Plastics Industry—through its Vinyl Institute—can bring together leaders of the vinyl industry from around the world to address common environmental concerns for the first time.

We're here because we share an interest in the strength and growth of the plastics industry worldwide. I also believe we agree that the increasing globalization of plastics markets means we must cross boundaries and work together to help ensure our industry's growth.

This is the second time this summer I've had the opportunity to be part of an international exchange on plastics industry issues. In June, I participated in the annual meeting of the International Plastics Association Directors, or IPAD, a forum for chief executives of plastics trade associations around the world.

The IPAD held its first meeting in 1969 and has met each year since then. Our meetings focus on sharing information about critical industry issues. And we learn from one another about important activities being undertaken around the world to address those issues.

I believe these international forums help us to represent the plastics industry more efficiently and effectively.

At this year's meeting, 16 countries were represented, from Australia to Hungary to Japan. Certainly, we had our particular domestic issues to discuss. But we all agreed that addressing concerns about the environmental impact of plastics is the number-one priority for our industry worldwide. Topping the list of environment concerns are the challenges posed by solid waste disposal and recycling.

The agenda of this conference reflects how important it is for us to confront the solid waste and other environmental issues on an international level.

I believe you'd agree that environmental protection has become a core value for consumers in the U.S., in Japan, in Western Europe and in many other countries. Unfortunately, however, consumers do not yet understand how plastics fit with these values.

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Attitudes about the environment often are emotionally charged and, in the case of plastics, frequently fueled by misinformation. Compounding the problem, I believe, is the public's tendency—at least here in the U.S.—to look for quick and easy solutions to problems. Plastic packaging has become the solid waste scapegoat, and recycling is viewed as the cure-all.

The vinyl industry has been a target of this simplistic response to the solid waste problem. Environmentalists have called for eliminating PVC in packaging because of concerns that its use interferes with plastics recycling.

We know that vinyl packaging exists because it delivers a unique performance the public wants in the most efficient way. We must work to ensure that the performance-based needs of consumers are not compromised by phasing out certain materials—if such action has no real proven benefits to the environment.

The push to recycle at any cost has led to the proposal of stringent and often unrealistic laws and regulations aimed at solving the solid waste problem. Consider, for example, the new German packaging ordinance, which has the potential to become a model for other countries.

This law calls for the collection of 80 percent of all packaging and the recycling of 64 percent of all plastic packaging by 1995. German industry has proposed extending the recycling deadline. And they have called for acceptance of incineration as part of an integrated solid waste management approach. It is my understanding that these important industry proposals have not yet been accepted.

Clearly, we must strengthen our efforts to support the passage of constructive laws. And we must continue to oppose ill-conceived legislation and product bans that would cripple our industry without any meaningful benefit to society.

But we also accept that recycling is a key component of an integrated approach to solid waste management. For this reason, we must continue to promote plastics recycling technologies and, in particular, foster markets for post-consumer plastics.

I'm proud of the progress we've made in this area so far. In the United States, we saw a significant increase in the recycling rate for plastic bottles and containers last year. Our goal is to have the majority of Americans recycling 25 percent of all plastic bottles and containers by the end of 1995.

In addition, about 1200 communities in this country have access to vinyl plastics recycling. I'm delighted that SPI's Vinyl Institute continues to play a major role in showing that vinyl products can be integrated into all phases of the solid waste management process. Of note, the Institute co-sponsored the development of technology to automatically separate vinyl packaging from other plastics found in municipal solid waste. That effort has been recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Yet we know that solid waste and recycling are not the only environmental issues. Concern about the toxicity of our materials and products also requires our attention. PVC, among a number of our industry's materials and products, has been targeted by environmentalists because of toxicity concerns.

Recently, an independent U.S.-Canadian body called for the phase-out of so-called toxic substances, including chlorine and chlorine-containing compounds.

It is important for us to know what is safe and what is not. We also must work to make sure that decisions affecting our use of necessary chemicals and substances are based on sound science and risk assessment techniques.

Given these major environmental and safety issues, it's fair to say that a threat to key markets for our materials and products exists—but only if we fail to act in a responsible and unified way.

An excellent example of this kind of responsible, united action is a major initiative being undertaken by the U.S. plastics industry called the Partnership for Plastics Progress.

I realize the U.S. delegation here this evening is familiar with the Partnership programs. However, I believe our foreign colleagues are interested in learning about this important initiative—so please bear with me.

The Partnership is a multi-year effort, directed by key executives in the U.S. plastics industry, to improve the environmental performance of plastics and consumer acceptance of plastics products. The Partnership has a core membership of 27 companies and has formed a direct link with our association's more than 2,000 members.

The initiative is designed to help consumers make more informed decisions about plastics and to address the environmental issues that are negatively affecting all kinds of plastics in the marketplace.

The Partnership's programs will lead industry activities in some areas, complement in other areas and be a catalyst for the industry in yet others. The \$50 million budgeted for Partnership programs this year is only part of the U.S. industry's total financial commitment—individual company programs are investing much more on recycling ventures, waste minimization programs and longer range research and development to deal with the safe and economic disposal of plastics products.

One critical task is to inform consumers about the personal and environmental benefits of plastics. We call this task "Outreach."

For years, we in the industry have taken for granted that the benefits of our products in the marketplace are obvious. Our research shows, however, that the understanding of these benefits among consumers is low on all fronts. This is made worse by misinformation that is being put out that obscures the real issues and real solutions.

The Partnership's efforts will address the benefits of plastics in a positive, straightforward way, without attacking competing materials. Significant resources have been allocated to develop critical communications tools that include everything from teacher workshops to advertising.

These important outreach activities will be backed up by a tangible effort by our industry to deal with real environmental, health and safety concerns about our materials and products. We call this task "Product Stewardship."

Our mission in this area is to help achieve our 25-percent recycling goal. But it also involves promoting acceptance of integrated waste management strategies, gathering data and developing technology. A number of programs are being undertaken on an international level. These international efforts include commercializing automated sorting technologies . . . producing a white paper on plastics combustion with energy recovery . . . and developing a plastics industry life cycle inventory database.

Another key component of the Partnership initiative is to foster broad industry involvement in a grass roots effort to prevent unfair laws and regulations from being passed. We have, and will continue to have, effective representation in Washington and in every U.S. state capital where legislation of significance to our industry is under consideration. We call this task "Advocacy."

I believe our willingness to spearhead these efforts is because the plastics industry shares the public's very same values about our environment. We care about the quality of the air we breathe and the water we drink. We believe that the efficient use of energy resources is important. And we are committed to safe waste disposal practices.

I also believe that environmental and economic policies are interdependent. A clean, safe environment is not incompatible with a growing economy. In fact, strong economic growth and the development of new technologies are necessary to achieve the goals of environmental protection.

And as we work to meet our environmental responsibilities, we remain confident in the social value of the materials and products we manufacture. We face the future with the belief that plastics are not the enemy of the environment—they are one of the solutions to global environmental problems.

I have no doubt that the next two days will be filled with thought-provoking and stimulating discussion. I certainly hope this is the first of many international forums for the vinyl industry to explore how it can continue to improve the quality of our lives and our environment.

Again, I welcome you to Washington and thank you for the chance to be part of your program.