

Recycling myths

Just eyewash, or genuine sustainability? Greenwashing vs Green Cycling

Aluminium industry pleads for a sustainable loop economy +++

The epithet “100% recycled metal content” is not a yardstick for ecological common sense

Every step of what we do involves the emission of CO₂. Today more than ever before, the “carbon footprints” of products and services are right at the top of the priority agenda. In principle a good development, but there’s more to the matter here: the responsible handling of *all* natural resources. Ever more urgency can be heard, also on the international political stage, in the claims to genuine “sustainability”. A challenge that the German Association of the Aluminium Industry, the GDA, has also taken up. It’s a matter of defining an equilibrium between marketing-strategic demands of the processing industry on the one hand and ecologically responsible manufacturing processes on the other. For aluminium in particular, this means using both the available and the recycled resources of the metal with entrepreneurial farsightedness and with a sense of social responsibility, in keeping with the dictates of supply and demand. Indicators that are hardly of relevance or are even misleading - for example the propagation of a “recycled metal content” - are of no help in reaching this target, since the statement of the degree to which a product contains recycled metal does not go far enough in making an impact on the sustainability discussion. “In our opinion, this form of ‘greenwashing’ is an inadequate tool in dealing with consumers’ justified demands for information and with ecological issues in a responsible manner“, says Stefan Glimm, GDA Managing Director, who instead makes a plea for genuine sustainability.

Green Cycling is the true alternative

As a virtually infinitely recyclable material, aluminium has always occupied a future-oriented role. About 75 percent of all aluminium ever made has been in the metal

loop since the year 1888, constantly being reprocessed for new products. This has been confirmed by the global “Material Flow Analysis” reviewed by the Yale University in the USA, published annually by the International Aluminium Institute.* There’s hardly any other material – just think for a moment about the 1.1 trillion barrels of oil that have been extracted since the 19th century – that is still in the material loop to a degree of three quarters of the total original amount. For metals such as aluminium, sustainable action hence means repeatedly reprocessing the material and feeding it back into the cycle for new applications. Previous surveys conducted by the Organisation of European Aluminium (OEA) and the GDA demonstrate that the overall recycling rate for aluminium in Europe is more than 70 percent. In the automotive and construction sectors, this rate is even as high as 95 percent; in the packaging sector, the rate in Europe is still 50 percent.

Sources of raw material right on our doorstep

Aluminium can be found in a vast range of products, which hence represent important sources of the raw material aluminium for our future. An amount of almost 200 million tonnes of aluminium alone is today incorporated in architectural and building products – with a service life of 30 years or even longer. The average useful life of aluminium in products is about 30 years. As long as materials like aluminium can be economically and ecologically reprocessed from old products for further use, the scrap material will hardly be left lying around, but instead will be processed into new products within a very short time. There are no ifs and buts about it: a virtually perfect reprocessing and production cycle. A sustainable aluminium processing loop - an excellent way of protecting resources.

How credible are marketing slogans?

The aluminium industry is coming under ever-increasing pressure from building authorities and food and drink manufacturers to specify the recycled metal content of its products, this to enhance their advertising- and marketing-strategic arguments with assumedly ecological issues in an eye-catching manner. Simple-to-grasp advertising messages, for example: *“household foil made from 100% recycled aluminium”*, are all the rage. If all aluminium consumers were to claim that this would

make their product “greener”, it would in fact become necessary to artificially increase the proportion of production scrap. Only in this way would it be possible to achieve the higher share of recycled metal necessary to label an end-product truly 100% “green”. This gives rise, however, to the question whether this production approach would actually meet up to the demands of ecological common sense? After all, in this case the resource efficiency would be exactly the opposite of what industry and society should be aiming for. Stefan Glimm’s comment: “Even if we do have the technology to manufacture a given product entirely from recycled scrap, this is ecologically and economically paradoxical. The prices for secondary raw materials and thus also the final market price would rise considerably if all manufacturers were to adopt this approach.” What’s more, the simple fact is that there is not enough aluminium scrap available to satisfy today’s total demand for aluminium. In 2008, for example, the total aluminium demand worldwide amounted to 47 million tonnes of the metal. This demand was met by 37 million tonnes of primary aluminium and just 10 million tonnes of available scrap. Two factors are of essential importance in this regard: besides the growth of the market over the past few decades, the useful life of aluminium – in consumer goods about six months for a beverage can, about twelve years in cars, and 50 years or even longer in railway systems and the construction sector – has in the short term resulted in the current demand for aluminium exceeding the availability of this resource from scrap metal. The consequence of a massive increase in the demand for aluminium scraps would be a drastic rise in the purchase costs for the used metal – without even the slightest ecological benefit. Quite the contrary: attention-grabbing “greenwashing” messages without a long-term sustainability factor!

Artificial markets are no solution

Today’s prices for aluminium scrap are essentially based on a generally optimised aluminium-recycling market. The creation of “artificial” markets and material flows designed to satisfy specific inputs for a given product must inevitably lead to a sub-optimal allocation of the resources, even resulting in increases in overall transportation distances and in the related burden on the environment. To improve the ecological sustainability of aluminium further still, it makes much more sense to further en-

hance the collection and recovery of aluminium products at the end of their useful lives. From an overall ecological perspective, it is hence inappropriate to accuse a manufacturer of not acting in a resource-efficient manner simply because his products contain only a small share of recycled aluminium. He could, however, legitimately be blamed for doing too little to promote the sustainability of production and consumption if he is not making every effort to ensure that the aluminium is fed back into the material loop after it has been used.

Greater awareness for genuine recycling

“Instead of chasing after simple recycling messages and propagating ecologically questionable indicators such as the ‘recycled metal content’, the aluminium industry pleads the case that the material loops should be closed further still to promote greater sustainability in the production and consumption of the metal. This path enhances sustainability and benefits the environment. Ultimately, it also ensures that both the aluminium industry and its customers retain their credibility by actively supporting ecologically meaningful approaches to contributing towards sustainable production and consumption. This should be our common path,” is GDA Managing Director Stefan Glimm’s summary.

*Source: Marlen Bertram, Kenneth J. Martchek and Georg Rombach; Material Flow Analysis in the Aluminium Industry

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