

Extrupet commissions its 3rd food-grade line



Packaging design is imperative to the whole circular economy

EXTRUPET commissioned its third food-grade line in January and now has three operational food grade rPET lines. SA Polymer Technology spoke to Harjinder Kaur Jutley (Jiney), Extrupet's sales coordinator.

How has the installation of your third food-grade line been going?

Jiney: Wow, what a journey! The start of lock down, at the end of March 2020, brought with it the arrival of our new Starlinger reco STAR PET 165 HC iV and all installation plans had to be pushed back to the end of the year while lockdowns around the world took its course. We thankfully justified the arrival of the engineers from Europe over December 2020 and as of the end of January, have been running the new line.

Much has been said about the flagship PhoenixPET® brand that has grown into an rPET we believe is now used commercially in 100% mineral water applications. Do all three of your food grade lines use the same technology?

Jiney: With the new Starlinger line, we now have one Vacurema line and two Starlingers, all making food grade rPET. Our total capacity now is just under 3000 metric tons per month.

The certification levels are remarkable, from BRC to ISO, FDA, EFSA, GRS – what is the driving force behind a PET recycler being so focused on quality?

Jiney: Thank you, I think many of these requirements have come directly from our multinational partners that have global standards in place. We have been blessed to work with such wonderful partners over the last two decades and the quality standards are the output of these collaborations.

Have you seen the recycling space change much with the advent of the pandemic?

Jiney: We have seen pressure placed on the supply of raw materials, due to slower economic activity; however, we did prepare in advance for this and thankfully are in a good position to keep our three lines running well into the future. The quality of the feedstock has become very important. We notice that when brand owners do not take a relevant position on how their packaging will be reused or recycled in a South African context, it hurts the whole value chain.

What do you mean by relevant position?

Jiney: There needs to be an understanding of what is relevant in the specific geography that you are doing business in. Our reality in South Africa is that most of the raw

material we use originates from landfill. Therefore, brands need to understand when packages are designed, how their packs will be collected from landfill and ask if there is value in the chain to make sure they are actually recycled.

But anything can be recycled surely?

Jiney: Unfortunately, that is not the case. From a 'green washing' perspective, anything can be recycled yes, but from a practical repurposing perspective, unless the packaging is designed well enough in advance, the packs are doomed to an end-of-life on landfill or in our oceans. For instance, Sprite bottles are now clear instead of green; brand owners have taken the correct steps to ensure that bottles are designed better for greater recyclability. Coloured bottles have a limited use and are harder to recycle. Although bottle design is progressing, the same cannot always be said about the labels on the bottle, that's another challenge entirely.

Extrupet challenging 'alleged' benefit of recycling shrink sleeves labels

Do you have an example of this?

Jiney: There are many, I am sad to say, for example PVC and PET shrink sleeve labels cannot be recycled in South Africa. In fact, they cause real problems on our line if these slip through our system. But it is not just that, brands need to understand the circular nature of their choices.

Extrupet is constantly challenging the 'alleged' benefit of recycling shrink sleeves labels. It simply doesn't exist in South Africa or anywhere else in the world. Post-consumer recycling faces huge issues when processing PET bottles with PET or PVC labels.

Polyolefin wraparound labels are the preferred option as there is less adhesive, again reducing issues at the point of recycling. In an ideal world, no label would be perfect!

We are fighting hard to change this perception and along with PETCO, are educating the industry – both converters and brand owners. However, it starts at the very beginning with packaging and bottle design. The design is imperative to the whole circular economy and that's something the entire value chain needs to be aware of and definitely a part of.

A great example of companies making a change, and looking to improve recycling rates is Ribena. They have redesigned the sleeves on their plastic bottles, which as an end result will prevent down cycling and ensure more bottles are collected.

I think that it's important to have the courage to talk about real solutions that are relevant to your geography and economy. Standing up for what you believe does not always make you popular, but it is still the right thing to do.