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# For recyclable and sustainable flexible packaging

Sector protocol launched to give new life to flexible plastic packaging

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**E**ach year in Italy 180.000 tons of flexible packaging is produced, 80% of which is for the protection, conservation, transportation and commercialisation of food products.

Flexible packaging, consisting mainly of plastic materials, is frequently used in the food industry, which adopts it for 50% of its packages. In terms of ecological impact, this is a highly sustainable material, 70% of flexible packaging being recyclable, even if the actual recycling rate is affected by certain legislative and technological limitations associated with the composition of flexible packaging itself, generally multilayer and/or multimaterial.

The question of the actual rate of recycling of this material is particularly relevant for our economy for two reasons: firstly because flexible packaging is frequently used in our agricultural and food sectors, because while using little raw material and being light weight and efficient, it can guarantee the hygiene of the packed product, consumer safety and can offer the technological properties required by the market. Secondly because Italy is a European leader in the manufacturing of Machinery for the production of both flexible and non-flexible packaging, a market with a total value of over 11 billion euros per annum.

It is precisely to avoid the wastage of an important resource such as flexible packaging and to make a concrete contribution to the environment, that today the Vice President of Unione Italiana Food (Paolo Barilla), the President of Giflex (Alberto Palaveri) and

the Vice President of UCIMA (Riccardo Cavanna) signed a protocol of agreement providing for a collaboration which is unique of its kind between the three associations. The protocol was signed in the presence of the Right Hon. Giancarlo Giorgetti, Minister for Economic Development, and the Right Hon. Vannia Gava, Undersecretary at the Ministry for Ecological Transition.

In signing this protocol, the Associations undertake by January 2022 to organise an initial technical research group, made up of high-profile members from the supply chain, to analyse the problems that hinder the sustainability and recyclability of flexible packaging and to work out possible solutions.

Official representatives from the Ministry for Economic Development (Mise), the Ministry for Ecological Transition (Mite), the National Packaging Consortium (CONAI) and the National Consortium for the Collection, Recycling and Recovery of Plastic Packaging (Corepla) will also be invited to the table.

The synergies resulting from the protocol of agreement will then form the basis for setting up a series of technical research groups that will be responsible, among other things, for verifying what technological interventions can be carried out on packaging production and packaging lines to make it possible to use new materials, and for studying technological solutions to improve automatic systems for sorting and pre-treating plastic packaging waste and preventing it from being sent to landfills or incinerators. Assuming, as a starting target, a 50% recovery and recycling of collected flexible



packaging, an initial objective will be to recover about 50,000 tonnes of plastics for secondary use.

### Obstacles to sustainability in the flexible packaging market

In view of its widespread use, the effective recycling of flexible packaging is a challenge that involves all the players in the field and in particular the three sectors that together have a turnover of more than 50 billion euros: from the manufacturers of machinery for flexible packaging production, to the companies producing flexible packaging and the food sector, which is one of the main users. Although 70% of flexible packaging is recyclable, some technical obstacles – also common to other plastics – prevent it from being recycled. The technologies that sort dif-

ferent plastic packaging, for example, have limitations in recognising the materials from which it is made, both in terms of size and certain characteristics of the packaging itself, such as the metallisation of films. This means that even 100% recyclable packaging is not actually recycled: in Italy more than 50% of plastic materials (including flexible packaging) are collected as Mixed Plastic Waste, but not all of it can be recovered and is therefore sent to landfill or incineration.

In order for flexible packaging to move from “recyclable” to “recycled”, a number of issues will also need to be solved: firstly, the search for alternative outlet markets to food, since – with rare exceptions – the law prevents the use of recycled plastic in food packaging. Then there is the issue of the post-consumer flexible packaging management by municipalities which, despite its recyclability, ask

for plastic films to be delivered to the undifferentiated fraction. Finally, there is the big question of technology and research: finding replacement materials or reconverting tools and machinery are burdensome operations from an economic point of view and, above all, are not always technically feasible.

According to the EU Circular Economy Plan, by 2025 50% of plastic packaging must be recyclable, while by 2030 all packaging on the EU market must be reusable or recyclable in an economically sustainable manner. The agreement between Unione Italiana Food, Giflex and UCIMA is therefore a unique attempt. The aim is to pool skills and knowledge to achieve global and European emission reduction targets and to disseminate Circular Economy solutions capable of ensuring the consolidation of an equitable, healthy and environmentally friendly food system. ■



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