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## Way2K 2025

# "The quality of the recyclate is crucial

**Interview on the way to K 2025 with Thorsten Jacoby, Managing Director of Erlenbach GmbH, part of the hetech group**

### **Mr. Jacoby, how does Erlenbach contribute towards resource conservation and sustainability?**

As a medium-sized mechanical engineering company specialising in processing technologies for particle foams, we are making a significant contribution towards resource conservation and sustainability. Firstly, by continuously increasing efficiency to minimise energy consumption in the processing of particle foams. The use of these energy-efficient technologies also reduces the CO2 footprint of the products manufactured on these systems. In addition, EPS and EPP, for example, are highly recyclable. If the material is unmixed and only slightly contaminated, a recycling rate of almost 100 percent is possible. Finally, bio-based particle foams can also be produced using systems from the hetech group, of which Erlenbach is a part. Because the material is renewable, the CO2 footprint is even smaller in this respect.

### **What requirements are necessary to achieve high recyclate quality?**

The quality depends to a large extent on the purity of the variety on the one hand, and the recycling process on the other; there are already many technical possibilities available. The upstream processes of sorting and cleaning are also quite mature. In the end however, it is also a question of economic efficiency. All these process steps are cost-intensive, and if the price of virgin material is low, the production and processing of recyclate is not worthwhile. In any case, it is important to handle raw materials carefully when using them, for example: plastic waste is already being collected on construction sites, but rubbish bags contain insulation boards made of EPS, some of which are heavily contaminated. Additional sorting equipment is then required to separate the materials. However, it would be much better if the contaminants were not present within the boards in the first place. Product handling is the decisive factor, and these would then have to be designed in such a way that printed

material or adhesives, for example, can be removed very easily. People are not yet very aware of the need to do things properly when collecting. By contrast, EPS packaging for example can be very easily recycled in a single-sort collection.

### **Where are we on the road to a circular economy for plastics?**

Much is already possible in terms of plant technology, but there is still room for further optimisation. Recycling is already taking place. There are many efforts in the market to better organise and structure collection processes. Processors are often aware of the importance of recycling, but implementation also depends on the customers, some of whom still specify virgin material.

### **What can you do in this situation?**

It is important to raise awareness that a recycled product can fulfil the same requirements as one made from virgin material if it is of the same quality. The quality of the recycled material is crucial. One way of guaranteeing this quality would be to have uniform standards for recyclates. Processors would then always know exactly what material they order and receive. This would increase the acceptance of recyclate, and products made from recyclate, and this would also increase their use.

### **Is the plastics industry still struggling with its image?**

There are calls for a plastic-free world. What nonsense! It is impossible to imagine our modern world without plastic. The question is how to deal with plastics that are recyclable, and to what extent they should be recycled. There are many good approaches in the actual process, but also in higher-level processes. For example, we can already produce an rEPS from an EPS and process it in the same process. One major challenge is collecting the material so that it can be used again in the same processing method.

### **What role does chemical recycling play?**

All available possibilities of the circular economy are required in order to close all loops and produce high-quality raw materials. This also includes chemical recycling for those fractions that are not suitable for lower-threshold recycling, for example mechanical recycling. This allows the original raw materials to be recovered. In principle, the original monomer is turned back into PS and EPS. However, chemical recycling is a very complex process with correspondingly high costs.

### **What can K do to push the circular economy?**

K continues to be one of the world's most important trade fairs for plastics and rubber. It can therefore play a key role in promoting sustainable solutions such as the circular economy and help to make them more marketable. K is a major technology and innovation platform, where all renowned manufacturers from every region present their latest developments, and plant technologies, as well as all of the raw material manufacturers who are present with their newest innovations. This naturally promotes the exchange of best practices and also creates new ideas for the circular economy.

### **Contact for the press**

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**Industry interviews on the way to the K:**

It is impossible to imagine a world without plastic. And plastics are indispensable for mastering our future challenges. The plastics industry develops solutions so that a growing world population can live safely and prosperously. This important role as an enabler is expressed in the motto of K 2025: The Power of Plastics! Green - Smart - Responsible. Green, because plastics help to combat climate change and conserve resources. Smart, because digitalization helps to increase efficiency. Responsible, because the focus is on people. To get in the mood for the industry meeting in October 2025, the VDMA is giving representatives of the plastics machinery industry and of all other stakeholders in the sector a chance to have their say in a series of interviews.

**VDMA Plastics and Rubber Machinery**

More than 200 companies are members of the trade association, covering over 90 per cent of industry's production in Germany. Ten per cent of our member companies come from Austria, Switzerland and France. The German member companies account for a turnover of 7 billion euros in core machine construction and 10 billion euros including peripheral technology. In terms of value, one in four plastics machines manufactured worldwide comes from Germany; the export rate is 70 per cent. Chairman of the trade association is Ulrich Reifenhäuser, Managing Partner of Reifenhäuser GmbH & Co KG.