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GEOSYNTHETICS, SUSTAINABILITY, DURABILITY AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. Introduction

The rise in global temperature and consequent climate change require a reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the use of raw materials and fossil fuels. Sustainability is important, both in the production of building materials, as well as in the construction process. The use of geosynthetics can play an important role in this transition.

The major advantage of using geosynthetics in a structure is the reduction in CO₂ emissions. Compared to traditional construction products such as concrete, sand, gravel and steel the reduction can amount to 32 – 89%, dependent on the application (table 3). In addition, there is also a large reduction of the required energy compared to the traditional construction method. This can be up to 85% depending on the chosen technology. The use of geosynthetics results in considerable reduction of transport, as less traditional (heavy) construction materials need to be transported, sometimes over large distances. Also energy savings as result of reduced quantities of used construction materials can be achieved.

In addition to these advantages, there are some practical drawbacks. The use of plastic material creates waste that must be processed and removed from the environment. Geosynthetics have a long lifespan and are removed when the structure (e.g. a road) in which they are used is demolished.

After use, they can in some cases be recycled, after

which the polymer can be re-used as a base material for new plastic material to be produced. In other cases, it is incinerated. Although energy is generated by combined heat and power installations, incineration leads to the emission of CO₂.

When geosynthetics are used, nearly no fine particles are released in the environment, for example by leaching out in water. The composition of the polymer compound is designed in such a way that this does not happen since it would influence the material properties unfavourably. In addition, geosynthetics are tested for the release of environmentally harmful components and are only approved for use if they meet strict requirements.

Because geosynthetics are built into ground structures and they are designed to meet the service life of these structures, in normal cases little or no material is released after installation that may end up in the environment as litter. There is no abrasive- mechanical or hydraulic stress to create microplastics from geosynthetics inside the earth structure. Only in case the geosynthetics are not covered, small particles can be torn off by wear or abrasion. When handled properly, the post-use disposal and processing of the waste material have no negative environmental effects.

It is important that the correct geosynthetics are selected that suit the specific application. Selecting the wrong materials can cause problems in the long run. It is very important that the correct controls are made and management measures are

taken in all project phases. This involves the design phase (specific expertise required), material delivery (manufacturer supplies materials according to specifications), execution phase (contractor/installer with knowledge of geosynthetics) and operational phase (inspections, maintenance where necessary). Recently, some examples were reported of geotextiles that were not properly installed and that lay on the surface in riverbank structures. The movement of rocks caused wear and tear and pieces of geotextile were torn off. This is a typical example of overdue maintenance and poor operational management. The geotextile that has come to the surface must be covered in accordance with the regulations during the following maintenance rounds. Although these problems are rare, there is a perception that geotextiles can lead to substantial amounts of microplastics in the environment. This article demonstrates that this needs not be the case.

2. Durability of Geosynthetics

Geosynthetics are building materials that are used as soil reinforcement in road construction or in hydraulic engineering applications. They are also used in filter constructions in dikes, as separating layers in road construction and in many more applications. The various types and applications of geosynthetics are described in many reports, for

Table 1 – Required minimum service life of geosynthetics (Voskamp, W. e.a., Durability of Geosynthetics, 2016, page 15, extended version).

| | |
|---|-----------------|
| Separation layer only during the construction phase | 0,5 - 1 year |
| Permanent separation layer | 80 - 100 years |
| Replaceable filter layer | 10 - 25 years |
| Permanent filter layer (e.g. below stone revetment) | 80 - 100 years |
| Soil reinforcement under an embankment | 10 years |
| Reinforcement of retaining wall | 80 - 100 years |
| Pile-supported geosynthetic reinforced embankments | 100 - 120 years |
| Vertical drainage 1 - 3 years | |
| Geomembrane in a landfill | 100+ years |
| Waterproof tunnel lining | 100+ years |

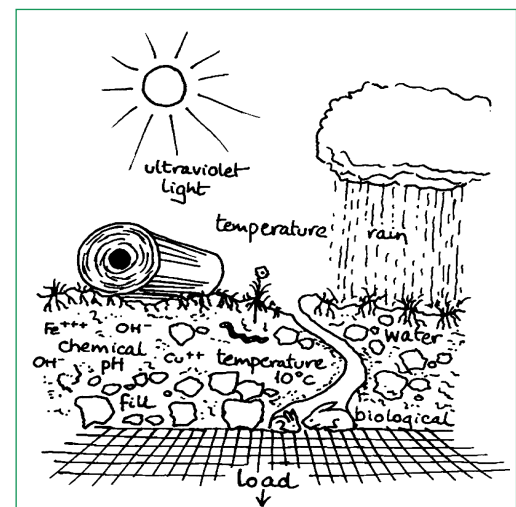


Figure 1 – Environmental factors, courtesy J.H. Greenwood (Voskamp et al., 2016).

SUMMARY

Major savings in CO₂ emissions and in the use of energy are reached when geosynthetics are applied in construction projects. But there are also potential environmental issues to be addressed, such as leaching and microplastics. This article examines the use of geosynthetics from different perspectives: the share of geosynthetics in the total use of plastics as well as the share in the waste

stream in Europe and the Netherlands; the possible leaching of hazardous substances from the geosynthetics during the life time and EU regulations in this respect; the various methods of recycling geosynthetics after the life time; and whether microplastics could potentially be generated from geosynthetics.

example by Van Deen et al. (2019) and Voskamp et al. (2016). In many of these applications, the geosynthetics must maintain their function throughout the life of the structure, which can be more than 100 years. Geosynthetics can meet this requirement if they are made of polymers with an inherent durability, like polyester (PET) or a compound with the right additives like polyethylene (PE) or polypropylene (PP).

Geosynthetics can be applied in the ground, above the ground, under and above water or on the waterline. These conditions significantly affect the service life of a geosynthetic material. Soil temperature, rainfall, soil type and particle size, installation method, soil chemical composition and intensity of UV radiation, may influence the geosynthetic service life (Voskamp et al., 2016).

The main polymers from which geosynthetics are made, are polyester (PET), polypropylene (PP) and polyethylene (PE). Geosynthetics made of these polymers are discussed in this paper. In some cases, other polymers are used such as expanded polystyrene (EPS) and polyvinylchloride (PVC). For specific environmental information about these polymers, used as geosynthetics, we refer to Plastics Europe (2022).

Additives are added to the base polymer, such as antioxidants, carbon black and/or other additives with specific properties. This is done to improve the processability of the polymer or to achieve the needed properties of the final product. The composition of the raw material can thus vary considerably. The additives can absorb UV radiation, be thermal stabilizers, antioxidants, etc. To ensure that the geosynthetic retains the required properties during its life, these additives shall not disappear from the geosynthetic. This is a design requirement and the materials are tested for this and the properties are recorded in CE certificates.

The main chemical degradation mechanisms are reactions resulting in polymer (chain) scissions or chemical modifications. Such reactions are affected by additives, oxygen, water, or dissolved substances in the soil.

Special chemicals are added to polypropylene (PP) and polyethylene (PE), so-called antioxidants,

Table 2 – Case study results from WRAP report (2010)

| Case History | Traditional approach CO ₂ Footprint (tons) | Geosynthetic approach CO ₂ Footprint (tons) |
|----------------------|--|---|
| #1 Slope Stability | 157 | 21 |
| #2 Bridge Approach | 500 | 346 |
| #3 Crib Wall | 35 | 11 |
| #4 Sheet Piling Wall | 433 | 69 |
| #5 Concrete Wall | 107 | 20 |

Table 3 – Savings in energy consumption and CO₂ emissions compared with traditional structures, (Stücki et al., 2019)

| Application | Savings compared to traditional structures | |
|--|--|--------------------------|
| | Energy consumption | CO ₂ emission |
| Separation material in a road construction | 85% | 89% |
| Road foundation reinforcement | 5-10% | 32% |
| Drainage layer | 56% | 67% |
| Retaining wall | 85% | 75% |

Table 4 – Case studies from GRI-24 Conference (March, 2011)

| Application area | No. cases described | Average Carbon Savings |
|------------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Walls | 6 | 69% |
| Embankments and Slopes | 4 | 65% |
| Armoring | 4 | 76% |
| Landfill Covers | 3 | 75% |
| Landfill Liners | 2 | 30% |
| Retention | 3 | 61% |
| Drainage Pipe | 3 | 40% |
| Totals | 25 | 65% |

which counteract oxidation. Oxygen will be inactivated by chemical bonding with the additives. In the long run, these antioxidants are used up or become ineffective, starting the oxidation process. Hydrolysis occurs when polyesters (PET) are exposed to humidity. This is a very slow process that depends on the temperature. The effect of water will be reduced with a low carboxyl end group content of PET, thereby counteracting possible cuts of the molecular chains. A high degree of orientation and crystallinity reduces the free volume of the amorphous phase where the reaction takes place and thus increases the resistance to hydrolysis. The effects of oxidation and hydrolysis usually manifest as loss of strength. Both oxidation and hydrolysis can occur with polyamide

(PA). Due to the lifetime design requirements for geosynthetics in a structure, it can be assumed that the chemical composition of the polymer compound is chosen in such a way that there will be no noticeable degradation of the polymer during the lifetime of the geosynthetics. (Voskamp et al., 2016)

At the end of the service life of the structure, the geosynthetic is in most cases removed from the ground. After removal it can be incinerated or recycled. Recycling is not yet possible in all cases due to recycling limitations or the impurity of the polymer after use. Research continues to yield better purification results. Some geosynthetics are already fully recycled.

3. Sustainability aspects of geosynthetics

The traditional civil engineering materials concrete, steel, clay and gravel, contribute greatly to the carbon footprint of any construction project. Avoiding or minimizing the use of these primary materials by using geosynthetics helps to reduce the inherent embodied carbon of these projects. Of course, the environmental impact of the

geosynthetic solution must be calculated in the same way as this is done for the traditional material solution. Several studies show numerically that the use of geosynthetics will reduce the CO₂ emissions and energy consumption considerably, we mention three of these studies:

Quantitatively, the numeric decrease in carbon footprint using geosynthetics solutions for walls and slopes is shown in the Waste and Resources Action Program (WRAP, 2010) (Table 2).

Table 3 shows the savings in energy consumption and CO₂ emissions compared with traditional structures found by Stücki et al. (2019) in an extensive study.

The GRI-24 Conference on Sustainability in 2011 listed the average embodied carbon savings in 25 analysed applications in the USA. An overall average of 65 % reduction in carbon footprint using geosynthetic related alternatives was realized (Geosynthetics Research Institute, 2019).

Table 5 – Overview of the quantities of used plastic materials in Europe and the Netherlands.

| | Packaging | Construction building materials | Household goods | Others / unknown | Total | Source |
|--|-----------|---------------------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------|---------------------------------------|
| Plastics market size Europe, 2020 | 16.7 Mt | 10.3 Mt | 9.9 Mt | 12.5 Mt | 49.4 Mt | (Systemiq, 2022) |
| Plastics market size Netherlands, 2020 | 627 kt | 313 kt | 836 kt | 314 kt | 2090 kt | Calculated, based on (CE Delft, 2019) |

Table 6 – Estimate of the market size of geosynthetics.

| Geosynthetics market | Area | Weight | Source |
|----------------------|------------------------|---------|-----------------------------|
| Europe, 2020 | 650 mio m ² | 200 kt | Estimate based on EAGM data |
| The Netherlands | 37 mio m ² | 11.4 kt | Estimate based on EAGM data |

Table 7 – Plastic waste processing in Europe and the Netherlands.

| Plastic waste processes | Landfill | Recycling | Energy conversion / incineration | Total | Source |
|--|--------------|--------------|----------------------------------|---------|--|
| Plastic waste Europe, 2020 | 6.9 Mt | 10.2 Mt | 12.4 Mt | 29.5 Mt | Plastics Europe, 2022 |
| Plastic waste Netherlands, 2020 | 13.9 kt (1%) | 644 kt (39%) | 990 (60%) | 1650 kt | CE Delft, 2019 |
| Plastic waste construction sector, Netherlands, 2020 | 7 kt (10%) | 17 kt (25%) | 44 kt (65%) | 68 kt | CE Delft, 2019, Plastics Europe, 2022, NRK, 2018 |

Depending on the application it may be concluded that the use of geosynthetics reduces the carbon footprint with 32 – 89 % compared to the use of traditional civil engineering materials as concrete, steel and gravel. The savings in energy vary from 5 – 85 %, heavily influenced by the transport distance and the volume (and weight!) of the building materials.

4. Circularity of Plastic

The plastic circular economy cycle consists of various steps:

- Polymer raw material is converted into plastic products.
 - Waste material during production is fed into the process again as pre-consumer recycled plastic.
- These products are used by consumers and in industrial applications.
- They perform during their service life.
- After completion of their service life they are collected and sorted.
 - Used for recycling.
 - Stored at landfills.
 - Burned with energy conversion.
 - Lost in the environment.
- Post-consumer waste is after mechanically processing fed into the production process.

The circular plastic economy is shown in figure 2.

4.1 AMOUNTS OF PLASTIC IN SOCIETY

As shown in figure 2, plastic material is applied in many sectors of the society. The most important are: packaging material, household goods and construction material. Geosynthetics fall under the category construction material, but are only a small part of it.

Systemiq (2022) analysed the European plastic market and concluded that the total demand in

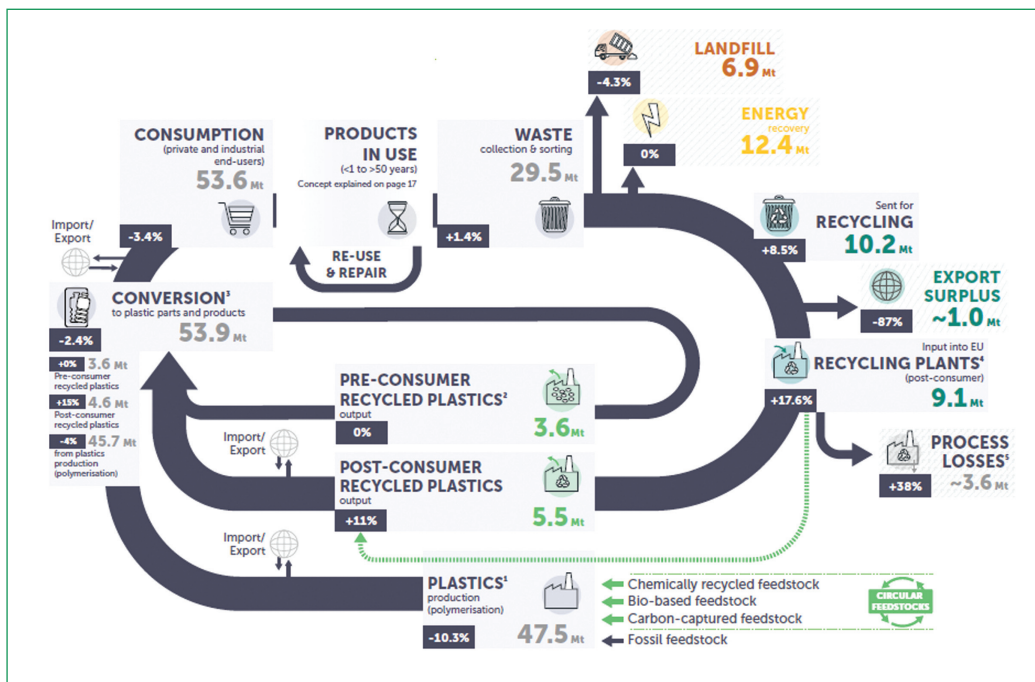
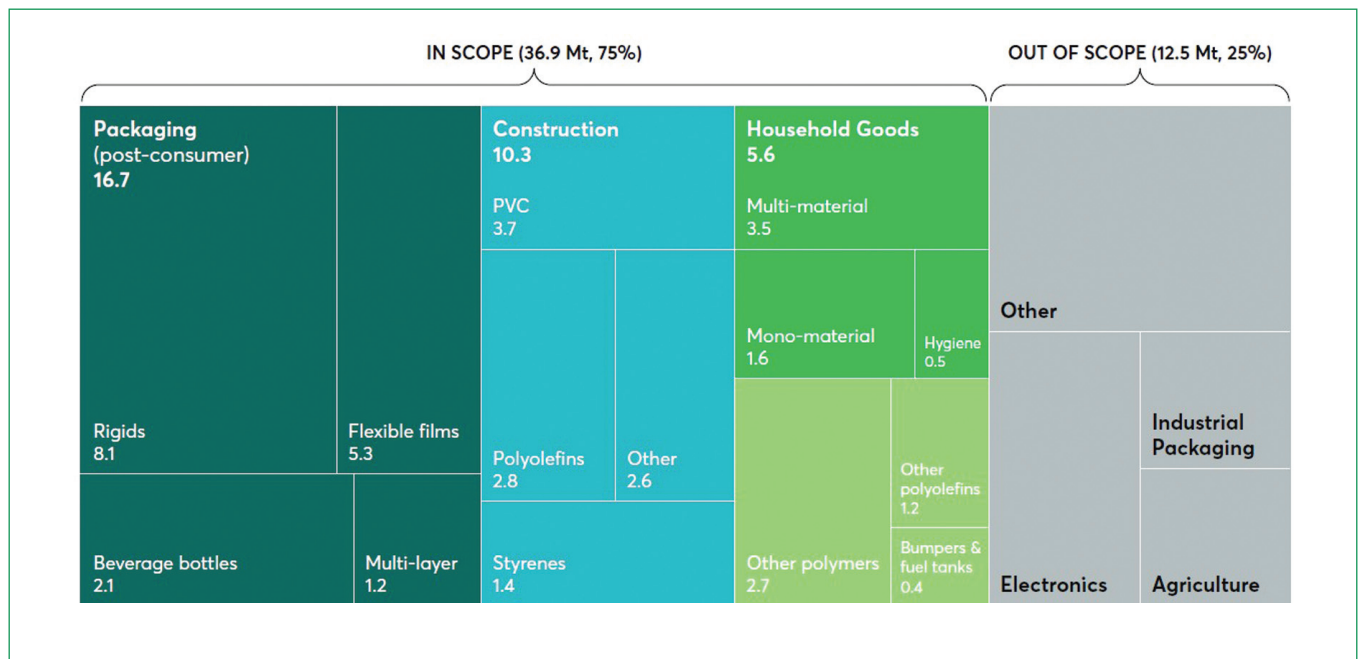


Figure 2 – Plastic circular cycle, with quantities of material in 2020, the percentages are the change between 2018 and 2020. The thickness of the arrows or bars is not to scale. Reference courtesy Plastics Europe, 2022.

Figure 3 –
Composition of the European plastic market broken down in categories (Systemiq, 2022).



2020 was 49.4 Mt. The division in categories packaging (16.7 Mt), construction (10.3 Mt), household goods (5.6 Mt) and others (industrial packaging, electronics and agriculture) (12.5 Mt) is shown in figure 3 (Mt = million tonnes).

The construction sector sizes 10.3 Mt. Most geosynthetics are made of poly-olefins (PP and PE) or polyesters (PET). These categories are resp. 2.8 Mt and 2.6 Mt (in total 5.4 Mt). It is expected that the construction sector will grow with a long-term average of 1 – 1.5 %/yr.

CE Delft estimated that in 2017 approximately 1900 kt (1 kt = 1000 t) of plastic material was used in the Netherlands. 40% of this is used in consumables, 30% in packaging, 15% in construction materials, 11% in clothing and textiles and 3% in cars and electrical appliances (CE Delft, 2019). With an average growth of 2% / year, that would be about 2090 kt of new plastic material used in 2022.

In 2009, 523 million m² of geosynthetic material was used in Europe. With an average weight of 300 g/m², this gives 157 kt. Assuming a volume increase of 25% over the period up to 2022, the use of geosynthetics in Europe can be estimated at approximately 200 kt.

Based on numbers above it can be concluded that the quantity of geosynthetics used in Europe is 1.9 % of the total use of plastics in the category construction materials (200 kt/10300 kt) and only 0.4% of the total quantity of used plastic in Europe (200 kt / 49400 kt).

The size of the Dutch market in geosynthetics is estimated at about 5.7 % of the European market. This means that the quantity of new geosynthetics used in the Netherlands in 2022 can be calculated as 5.7% of 200 kt = 11.4 kt.

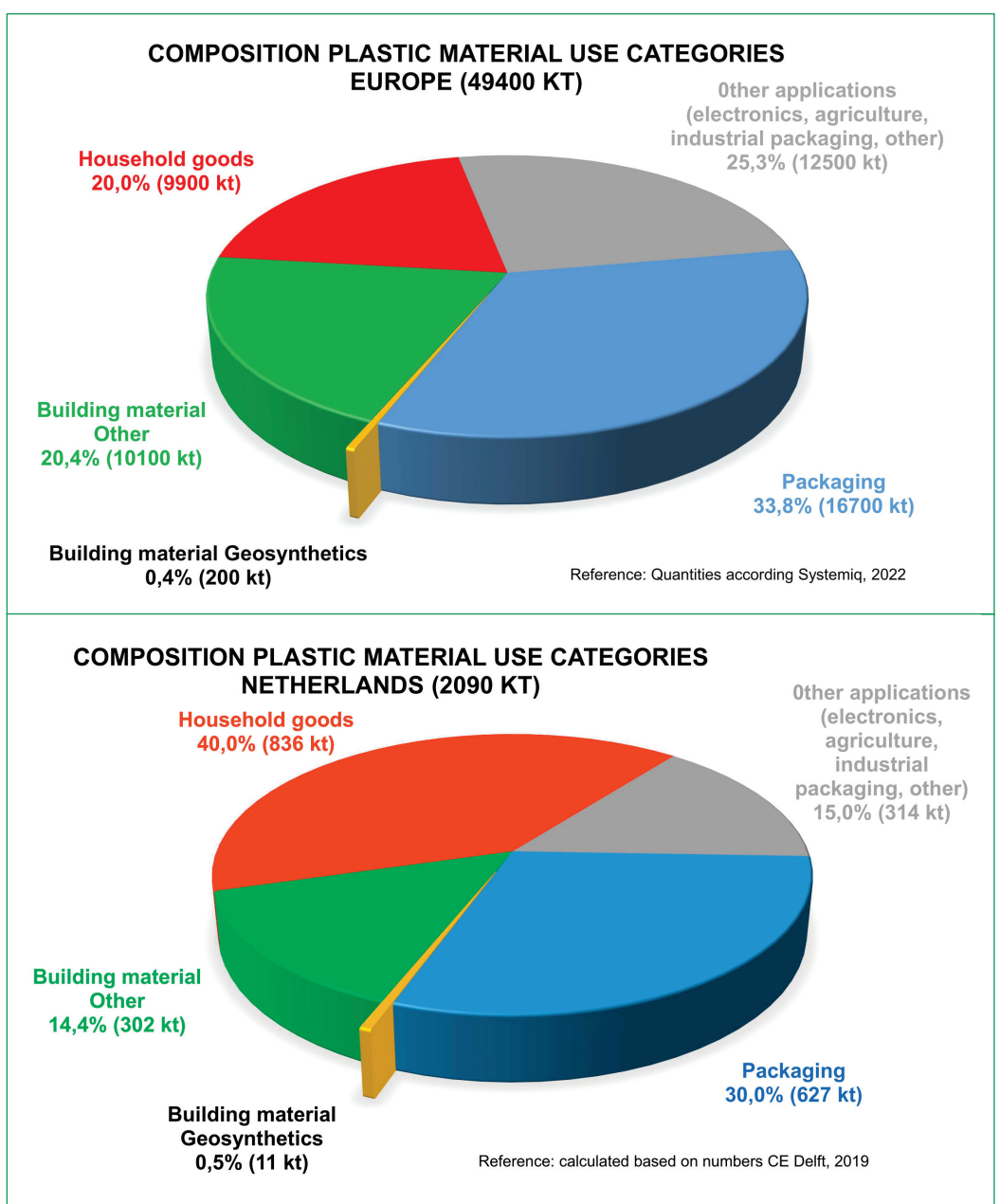


Figure 4 – Overview of the quantities of used plastic materials in Europe and the Netherlands.

Based on the numbers in table 6 it can be concluded that the quantity of geosynthetics used in the Netherlands is 11.4 kt / 313 kt = 3.6 % of the plastics used in the construction market and 11.4 kt / 2090 kt = 0.5 % of the total amount of plastic used in the Netherlands.

4.2 DISPOSAL OF PLASTICS

Waste from plastic material is the material that is left over during or after use and that is disposed of. It may be packaging material of, for example, food, or utensils after use, or construction material after demolition. It can therefore have a very short

lifespan (packaging) or have a long service life in the case of construction materials in civil engineering structures. Plastic waste material must be collected appropriately, recycled and re-used where possible. It is still partially incinerated because recycling is not yet sufficiently organized in many countries. Incineration in combined heat- and power plants recovers energy, but it results also in extra emissions of CO₂. The long-term goal is to recycle as much as possible.

The total quantity of waste of plastic material in Europe was 29.5 Mt in 2020 (Plastics Europe, 2022). This is approx. 60 % of the supply of new products. 6.9 Mt was sent to landfills, 10.2 Mt was sent for recycling, and 12.4 Mt was incinerated. The waste in poly-olefins or polyester in Europe can be calculated as 1.7 Mt and 1.6 Mt, resp. 5.7 % and 5.4 % of the total quantity of waste.

The quantity of plastic waste in the Netherlands in 2017 was about 1650 kt (CE Delft, 2019). 32% of this consists of plastic single-use packaging, 12% of consumer articles, 9% of clothing and textiles, and 4% of construction materials. The rest is from other, undefined, sources. The quantity of waste in the construction material sector is 68 kt. Of this 68 kt, 17 kt (25 %) was recycled, 44 kt (65 %) incinerated and 7 kt (10 %) landfilled. The construction material category consists of pipes, insulation material, window profiles and other plastics, including geosynthetics.

Geosynthetics form 11.4 / 313 = 3.6 % of the plastics used in the construction market in the Netherlands. The quantity of waste resulting from the use of geosynthetics in the Netherlands can be estimated at 3.6 % of 68 kt = 2.5 kt, which is a very small percentage of the total plastic waste in the Netherlands (2.5 / 1650 = 0.15 %). The quantity of waste resulting from the use of geosynthetics in Europe can be estimated at 120 / 29500 = 0.41 % of the total plastic waste material.

Geosynthetics are used in applications with a long service life, so it will take time before these products will reach their end of use, and the quantity of material that comes available as waste per year is still relatively small.

The largest part of waste from geosynthetics in the Netherlands is incinerated (65%). Mechanical recycling is done in 25 % and dumping on landfills is done in 10%. The policy is to reduce the dumping on landfills as much as possible. The incineration is done in ovens, which generate power by coupling to a power plant. The investments in these ovens are rather recent and it will take time before they are phased out. Simultaneously mechanical recycling processes are improved enabling more waste material to be recycled.

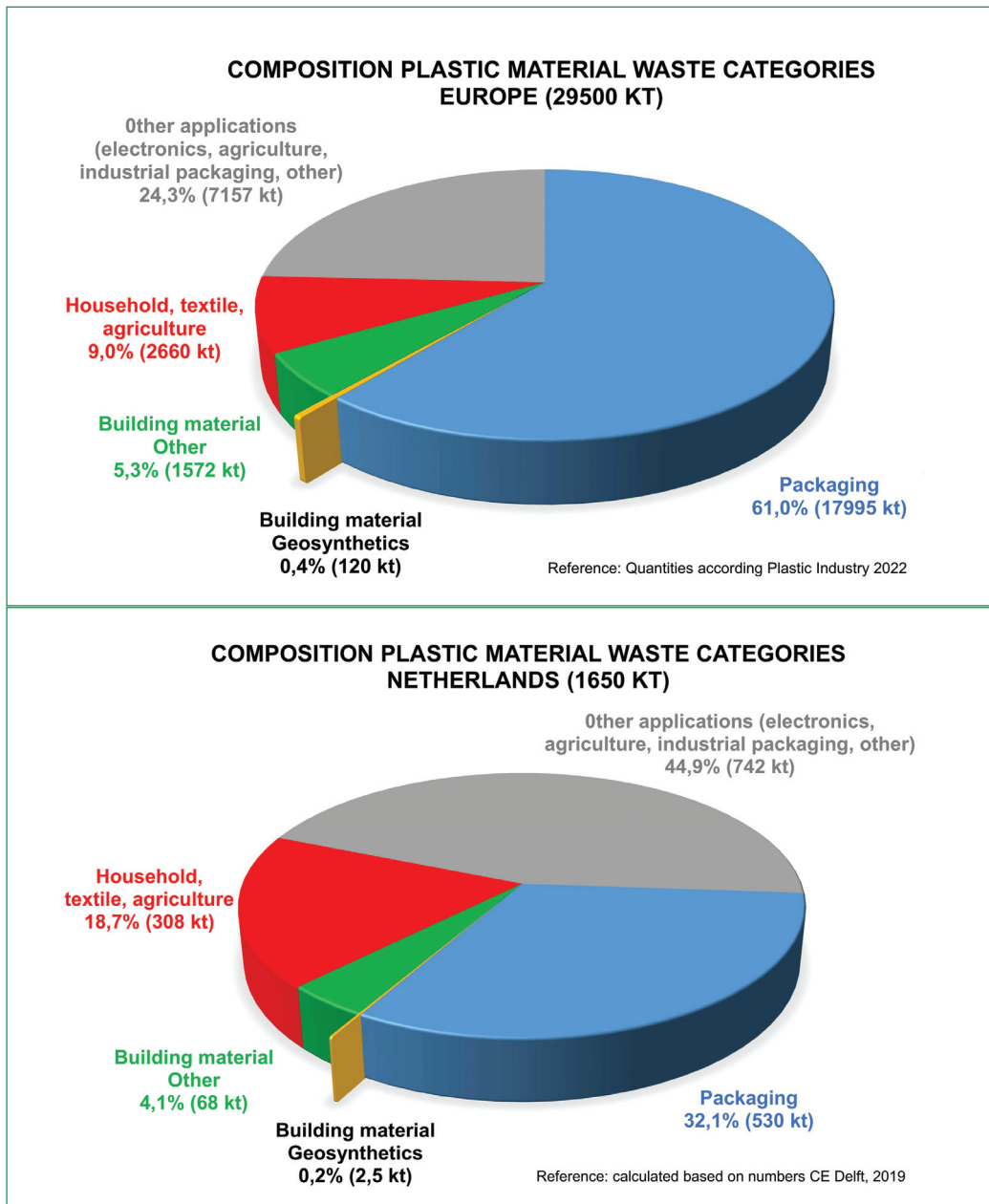


Figure 5 – Overview of the quantities of plastic waste materials in Europe and the Netherlands.

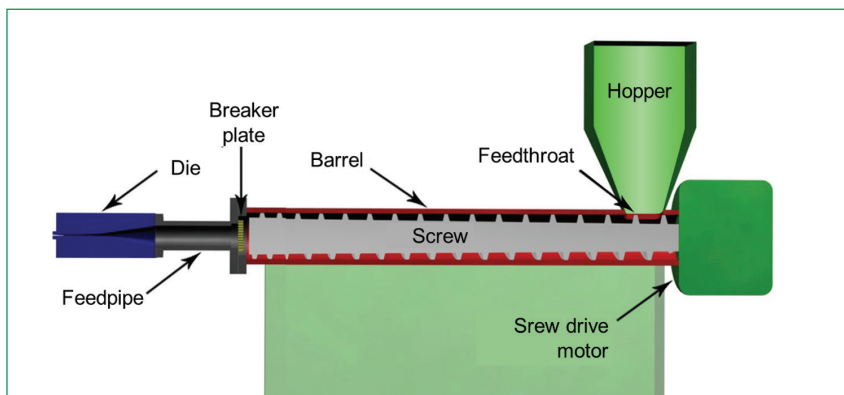


Figure 6 – Typical screw extruder (Reference: https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plastic_extrusion).

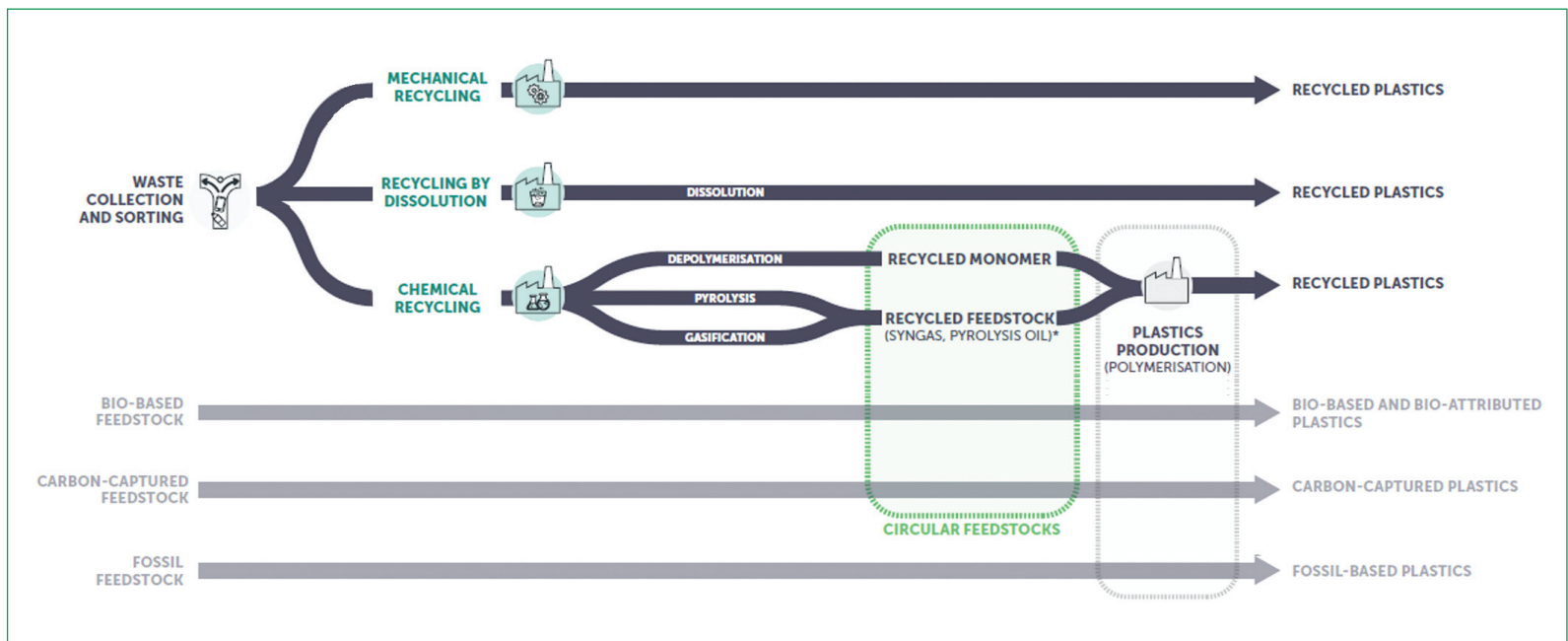


Figure 7 – Overview of recycling methods (Plastics Europe, 2022).

5. Sustainability in the production of geosynthetics

Geosynthetics are made of synthetic polymers, which are supplied by the chemical industry. Macro molecules are made by means of a polymerisation process in a reaction vessel. During the processing to the final granules or powder, additives like chain terminators, viscosity stabilizers, antioxidants, fire-retardants and others can be added to the polymer compound to create specific properties. The granules are melted by the producer of geosynthetics using an extrusion process and shaped through a fine opening, the die, to form filaments or sheets. In case of geotextiles, the filaments are stretched to improve the modulus of the final yarn. After that, mats or fabrics are formed by weaving, or by a mechanical or heat bonding non-woven process. Other production processes besides extrusion can be applied to manufacture geosynthetics, a.o. extrusion of a flat sheet or blown sheet extrusion, split fibre extrusion or calendaring.

The polymer properties such as molecular weight, degree of crystallinity, melt flow index, viscosity, melting temperature etc. are important properties for the final product performance. Any contamination of the polymer compound should be eliminated to prevent cutting of the yarn through the very small extrusion opening (100 – 25 µm).

In case recycled polymers are used in the production process, they must fulfil stringent requirements on the properties, no large variations are allowed. This results in high requirements in the recycling process.

The production of geosynthetics implicates energy

use and CO₂ emissions. Improvements in the production processes may lead to significant reductions in emissions and energy use. Also environmental protection measures can be taken (Ramsey, 2022):

- The use of packaging material can be greatly reduced;
- The transport of semi-finished products in the factory and of finished products to storage and to the end-user can be organized more efficiently;
- Generation of energy by means of solar panels on the roofs of factory halls will increase the process sustainability;
- Extrusion of polymeric material is done at high temperature and the formed geosynthetic material must be cooled afterwards. In this process, heat can be recovered; In general, heat can be extracted from cooling water before it is discharged;
- Waste material that results from the production process, such as cut off sides of polymer sheets, short rolls etc. are shredded and are fed into the production process again;
- End-of-service-life material can be re-used after purification of contaminants as a separate raw material stream;
- Production methods that allow the use of other post-industrial polymer waste and post-consumer polymer waste material can be developed.

6. Sustainability at the end-of-life of plastic material

At the end-of-life of a structure, the geosynthetic material will have to be disposed of. The following paragraphs deal with four processes: removal, re-use, recycling and incineration.

6.1 REMOVAL

In order to separate the material properly, a few conditions must be met:

The geosynthetic material must have sufficient cohesion so as not to break down into small parts. This means that disassembly of the structure must be within the lifetime of the geotextile or that over-designed geosynthetics are used with sufficient strength end-of-life. This must be taken into account in the design stage and in the geosynthetic specification.

During the execution and installation of the geosynthetic, it must be recorded and checked where exactly the material is in the structure, preferably by means of a laying plan (including changes 'as built').

In addition to the selection of a contractor who will carry out the dismantling, it must also be known which waste disposal system will be used.

Recycling should be preferred and stimulated. Incineration should not be preferred only for economic reasons (cheapest solution).

Producers of geosynthetics should enter into agreements with a number of (high-level) waste processors and recycling companies about the recycling of their products.

6.2 RE-USE

In addition to recycling end-of-life geosynthetics, it is also necessary to analyse whether a built-in product can be re-used as geosynthetics without any thermal treatment.

This means that it must be analysed whether, in the case of polyethylene (PE) and polypropylene (PP), there are still enough antioxidants present in the polymer material to be able to function for a

number of years. This can be done using an oxidation induction time (OIT) test (Voskamp et al., 2016). In the case of polyester (PET), it will have to be determined how much creep has already taken place under the long-term load. (Voskamp W., 1997) and if any change in molecular weight and Carboxyl Endgroup Content (CEG) has taken place. It is also important to check that no unacceptable mechanical damage has occurred.

6.3 RECYCLING

In case end-of-life geosynthetics cannot be re-used as they are, they must be processed to prevent that the material ends in the environment.

There are basically three ways to process the waste:

1. Dumping at a landfill
2. Incineration of the plastic in combination with energy recovery.
3. Recycling the basic raw material

All kind of measures are taken to reduce the quantity of material that is dumped in landfills. Recycling is promoted as much as possible and incineration is taking place to eliminate the rest.

Recycling is the best method from the point of environmental protection. No new fossil raw materials are used, and the embodied carbon of the plastic material is preserved. Although incineration yields new energy, it results also in further CO₂ emissions. Therefore, the long-term plans focus on reduction of the incineration in favour of increased recycling. Recycling can be done in various ways.

An overview of the various recycling methods is given in the recycling diagram by Plastics Europe (2022).

6.3.1 MECHANICAL RECYCLING

The mechanical recycling process consists of:

1. Collection and distribution of post-consumer, post-industrial materials or end-of-use construction materials.
2. Sorting and categorizing, the different types of plastic are sorted, sometimes also on colour and use. This is done at the recycling plant.
3. Washing removes some of the impurities that can impede the operation, or completely ruin a batch of recycled plastic. The impurities targeted in this step are product labels and adhesives as well as dirt.
4. Shredding. The plastic is then fed into shredders, which break it down into much smaller pieces. These smaller pieces can be processed in the next stages for re-use. It allows also for any remaining impurities to be found, such as metal, which may not have been removed by washing but can be easily collected with a magnet at this stage.
5. Identification and separation of plastics. First,

the plastic pieces are segregated based on density, which is tested by floating the particles of plastic in a container of water. This is followed by a test, which determines the thickness of the plastic pieces. The shredded plastic is placed into a wind tunnel, with thinner pieces floating while larger/thicker pieces stay at the bottom.

6. Extruding and compounding. This final plastic recycling process step is where the particles of shredded plastic are transformed into a usable product for manufacture. The shredded plastic is melted and crushed together to form pellets. The shredded plastic is divided per type, classification, and qualities of plastic.

The mostly used polymers for geosynthetics and their recycling practice are:

– Polyester (PET) – Polyethylene Terephthalate

One of the most common types of plastic which is used for the manufacture of products such as food containers and plastic bottles for water or soft drinks. PET is widely recycled. Special soil-reinforcing materials are made of PET.

– HDPE – High-Density Polyethylene

This type of plastic is used in detergent bottles, food and drink storage, bottle caps, some thicker shopping bags, and non-single-use plastic products like toys, helmets, and piping. Again, this type of plastic is widely recycled. Most geomembranes are made of HDPE.

– PP – Polypropylene

Commonly used in injection moulding, this plastic can be found in products from bottle caps to surgical tools and clothing. PP is recyclable but not so easy to process. Most geosynthetics are made of PP yarns or sheets. These categories are easier to recycle than materials that are made from two different polymers e.g. food packaging.

It must be noted that with each subsequent processing, the recycled material degrades and has a lesser quality than virgin materials. The quality of the polymer compound must be increased during the processing by adding additives or using a chemical recycling method. Also, the purity of the recycled compound is very important and often a decisive factor in the acceptance of recycled material to replace virgin polymer.

Various types of geosynthetics are currently being marketed that are made from recycled polymer, for example, polyester non-wovens made from 100% recycled bottle scrap (Ramsey, 2022). Sheets of 100% recycled PP are also made as a semi-finished product in the production of drainage material. Post-industrial waste, i.e. waste that arises during the production of geosynthetics, is often immediately re-used in the production process after shredding.

Until now, according to CEN regulations, no recycled raw materials may be used in the production of high-quality reinforcement mats due to uncertainty about the effects on the properties of these mats or for geosynthetics with an intended service life of more than 5 years in general. Also, there are limits given for the use of recycled material which have been thermally treated during the production. It is expected that these regulations are reconsidered based on the improved knowledge of the quality of (partly) recycled polymer compounds.

6.3.2 CHEMICAL RECYCLING

Chemical recycling is the process of returning used plastic material to its original building blocks, such as polymers, monomers, etc., by means of chemical processes, so that it can be used again as a raw material for new plastic products. Various methods are being developed for this:

– Solvent-based purification is a process in which the plastic is dissolved in a suitable solvent, in which a series of purification steps are undertaken to separate the polymer from additives and contaminants. The resulting output is the precipitated polymer, which remains unaffected by the process and can be reformulated into plastics. The technology is used in the recycling of EPS.

– Depolymerisation is the reverse of polymerisation and yields either single monomer molecules or shorter fragments. PET can be recycled with this technique.

– Pyrolysis and gasification transform plastics and most of its additives and contaminants into basic chemicals. These technologies are based on heating up the plastics in an atmosphere of no (pyrolysis) or limited (gasification) oxygen content. In pyrolysis, plastics are broken down into a range of simpler hydrocarbon compounds. There are many conventional pyrolysis factories which produce oil or naphtha. The output of pyrolysis can be processed much in the same way as oil, using conventional refining technologies to produce value-added chemicals, including building blocks for polymers. Gasification is less sensitive to the input quality than pyrolysis, but it requires more energy and large-scale operations. Gasification is a process where mixed after-use materials are heated (-1000 - 1500 °C) in the presence of limited oxygen to produce syngas (a mix of predominantly hydrogen and carbon monoxide). The syngas can then be used to produce a variety of chemicals and plastics (Velis, 2019). Most polymers can be recycled in this way (Vollmer, 2020, CE Delft, 2019, Plastics Europe, 2022).

The quantities are not large at the moment. This

is because the processes are often in the development phase of pilot plants. In addition, the (investment) costs are still high. It is expected that more and more of these techniques will be applied in the next 10 years, in particular to make high-quality polymer as a raw material for critical products. McKinsey expects a considerable increase of chemical recycling in the coming years. (McKinsey, 2019). They expect that the percentage chemical recycling will grow from 1% in 2017 to 17% of the global polymer waste in 2030. With pyrolysis/liquid feedstock from 1% in 2017 to 13% in 2030, monomer recycling (depolymerisation and solvent based purification) to 4%.

Mechanical recycling is expected to grow from 12% to 22% of the global polymer waste.

Detailed data about the plastic industry investments in a.o. chemical recycling can be found in (Plastics Europe, 2022). In 2020 the quantity was < 0.1 Mt. Due to 44 planned projects in 13 EU countries 3.4 Mt of recycled plastic are estimated to be produced via chemical recycling in 2030.

6.4 INCINERATION OF PLASTIC WASTE

Until 2050, the incineration of plastic waste material will be the most important part of waste disposal. Incineration with energy recovery is being increasingly used as an alternative for landfilling. Over the last years in the Netherlands multiple state-of-art incineration plants were built, giving overcapacity in the market. This has effected in import of waste from abroad to keep the plants running. This situation is not really sustainable. It can recover energy within the waste and in doing so substitute emissions related to fossil fuel energy. It is however not a climate-neutral solution for end-of-life plastic.

European policy is aimed at promoting recycling as much as possible, as this leads directly to a reduction in the use of fossil materials. It replaces the use of virgin plastic material that emits approximately 4 kg CO₂/kg plastic material. As a result, the incineration of residual plastic waste will also decrease. (in absolute terms, it may still increase slightly due to an increase in the total use of plastics). Incineration in itself leads to the emission of 2.6 kg CO₂/kg plastic, but at the same time it generates energy through recovery, which leads directly to a reduction of energy production based on fossil material and thus a saving of CO₂. (CE Delft, 2019)

7. Contamination of the environment as a result of the use of geosynthetics

Residues of geosynthetic material can end up in the environment in a number of ways:

- As litter, if residues are left behind after the end of its service life (microplastics).
- Formation of small particles due to wear or

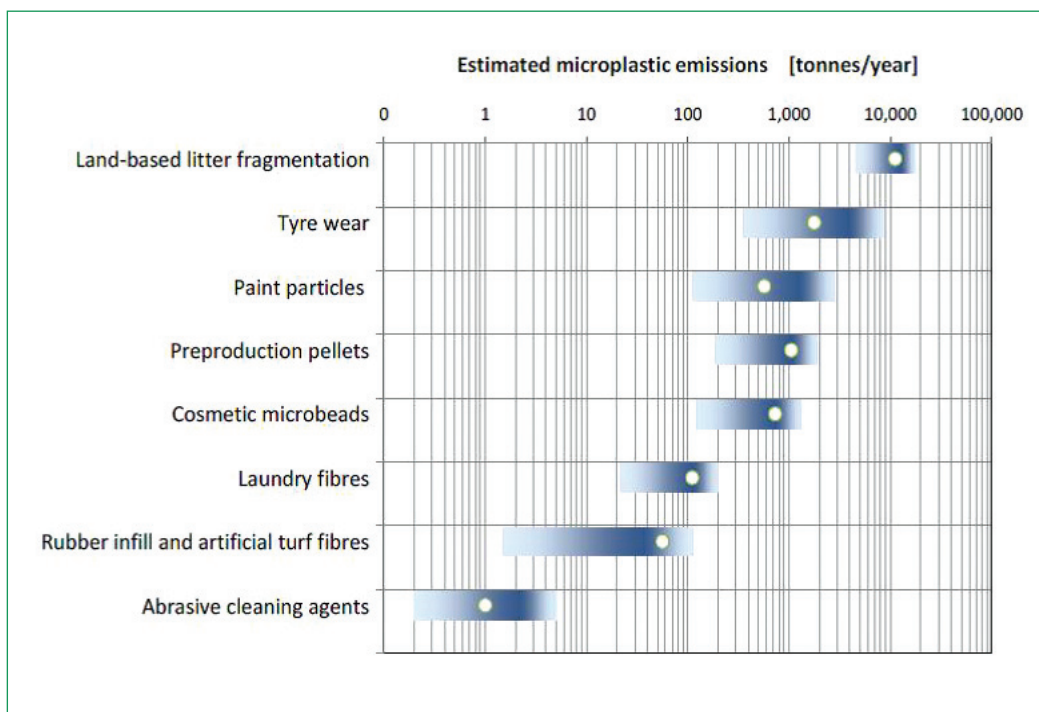


Figure 8 – Estimated emissions of microplastics in the Netherlands in tons/year (Verschoor, 2018).

surface damage during the service life (microplastics)

- Contamination due to leaching of additives during the service life.

Through implementation of guidelines, the creation of residual material after the end of its service life, which can lead to microplastics, needs to be avoided.

Also, leaching contamination must be avoided, which means that the geosynthetic material used must comply with requirements regarding maximum quantities of leached material. These requirements are based on the EU Directive EU 2020/2184: On the quality of water intended for human consumption.

7.1 CONTAMINATION BY MICROPLASTICS AND NANOPLASTICS

Microplastics are small plastic particles (< 5 mm), nanoplastics are very small particles (< 100 nanometre). They consist largely of synthetic polymers to which additives, oils, fillers, flame retardants, etc. have been added during the production process. A distinction is made between primary microplastics, which are produced and used as a separate particle, and secondary microplastics which are particles formed from plastic material by weathering or damage. (Stowa, 2022).

Microplastics from geosynthetics can come into the environment via land-based litter fragmentation, as is shown in figure 8.

When geosynthetics are installed in accordance with the methods described in the product

installation guides nearly no litter is created during the installation of geosynthetics. The material is supplied in large rolls that are cut to size and built into the ground. Only packaging material of the rolls can lead to litter if not properly cleaned up. At the end of its life, when the geosynthetic is removed, litter can form. This can then consist of pieces of material left behind. The quantity will be small compared to the area of installed material and compared to the quantity of litter from packaging and other consumer goods. Execution guidelines for the disposal of used geosynthetics must ensure that the disposal takes place efficiently and that no residual material is left behind on the construction site.

Of course, not all waste plastic material ends in litter. Most of it is collected and reprocessed. To get an idea of the quantity of plastic waste material that can end up in the environment, the quantity of litter must be looked at.

KIVD indicates that about 9 kt of plastic is present in the total quantity of litter in the Netherlands, of which about 8.3 kt consists of packaging (KIDV, 2017). Verschoor (2018) gives a margin between 1.4 kt and 11. kt with an average of 10 kt for the quantity of plastic in litter (quantities are per year). All this litter will ultimately not end up in the environment, a large part will still be removed by municipalities (street sweepers) and water boards. According to KIVD, 0.7 kt of plastic waste belongs to the other categories (non-packaging). The quantity of new plastic without the category packaging in the Netherlands is 2090 – 627 = 1463 kt. (see table 5). Geosynthetics form 11.4 kt / 1463 kt

= 0,78 % of this quantity (see table 6). This results in an estimate of 0.78 % of 0.7 kt = 5.46 t /year litter from geosynthetics. The total quantity of waste from geosynthetics in the Netherlands is calculated in section 4 as 2,5 kt. Therefore the percentage of litter that can arise from the quantity of waste material of geosynthetics is 5.46 t / 2500 t = 0.21 % and 5.46 t / 11400 t = 0.05 % of the yearly installed new geosynthetics. This litter will partly be removed by (street/building site) cleaning operations and only partly end as microplastic parts in the environment.

So, in order to address the general problem of (micro)plastic litter, the focus should be on reducing litter from the packaging category in particular. To this end, the EU 2019/904 directive has entered into force in 2021. This directive contains a ban on the marketing of a number of single-use plastic products. Deposit schemes for plastic bottles will further reduce the number of plastic bottles in litter and regulations are being developed in the EU requiring that by 2030 all packaging in Europe will be economically reusable, recyclable or biodegradable.

Most geosynthetics are built in the ground and are not exposed to ultraviolet (UV) radiation or direct wear. Therefore, the chance of fine particles being released as a result of wear or abrasion is very small. Wear can occur in some applications, for example when a geosynthetic is built in as a filter layer in the bank of a waterway. Then wear could occur due to abrasion.

This means that during the design of geosynthetics and the selection of the applied geosynthetics, requirements should be set for resistance to wear. Geosynthetics can be tested for this property. In ISO TC 221 a test method has been developed (ISO 22182: 2019-04), with which the resistance to wear can be measured. Requirements are then set at the national level. The Bundesanstalt für Wasserbau (BAW) requirements in Germany can be mentioned as an example (Maisner, 2019). By setting limitations and specifications in this way the wear or abrasion of geosynthetics can be largely avoided.

7.2 CONTAMINATION DUE TO LEACHING OF ADDITIVES DURING THE SERVICE LIFE

The application of construction material in the EU is regulated in Regulation EU 305/2011, the Construction Products Regulation (CPR). In 2011 the mandate of the Product Committee has been extended to include basic requirement 3 (Hygiene, health and environment) in the product standards. Technical Committee 189 is responsible for setting standards in the field of geosynthetics. With the test method CEN/TS 16637-2 Construction products – assessment of release of dangerous

substances, a standardized method has become available to determine how much material is released through leaching. The maximum quantity of material that may be leached is based on the quantities laid down in EU-Directive 2020/2184: On the quality of water intended for human consumption. The exact values for all types of harmful substances will be fixed on national level. They must be less than the values of Directive 2020/2184. Only products that have a CE mark may be used. A CE mark may only be used after initial type testing and the declaration of performance procedure, which establishes that the product meets all requirements that apply under the CPR directive. In this way it is ensured that the quantity of harmful substances that could end up in the environment will never exceed the maximum allowed quantity. An example of the maximum permitted quantities can be found in MGeokE (2016).

Geosynthetics which are used in road- and waterway applications in Germany must fulfil the requirements of MGeokE since 2005. Based on the results of these tests, it can be concluded that if a good formulation for the base polymer and the quantity and type of additives is chosen, the environment is not burdened by the release of hazardous substances from the geosynthetics.

The base polymers are not soluble. Only the additives, such as oxidation stabilizers or residues or over dosage of, for example, catalysts used in the production of the polymer and which are not sufficiently integrated into the polymer compound, can be released. Examples of these are antimony-(III)-oxide as a catalyst used to improve the condensation of PET, or metals such as copper, molybdenum or zinc which are added for various reasons during the melting phase of PE or PP.

In addition to the possible release of these inorganic substances, the release of a number of organic substances is also being investigated. The total quantity of organic carbon plays a key role in the assessment. The quantity released is measured after different periods of time, so that a good extrapolation can be made. Rules for this are laid down in the test procedure.

Since the number of organics in polymers is quite large and because it is almost impossible to analyse them all, indicator parameters of the total organic hydrocarbon content are used to get the first indication of the quantity of organics that are released. Total levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are suitable indicators to determine whether further testing is required on the polymer tested. Naphthalene, that falls in the category PAH, is a frequently formed chemical during the polymerization process.

A well-controlled production process will limit

all these substances that can leach out, to below the critical limits. Incorrect dosing of the additives during production or contamination of the machine with oil or solvents after maintenance cause the critical allowable limits to be exceeded. The substances that can be released from geosynthetics are not parts of the polymer itself but are always additives that can be chosen freely.

In recent decades under pressure from the rules of the EU Directive 1907/2006, replacements have been found for a number of hazardous additives, e.g. plasticizers for PVC. A number of other substances are also included in these tests, but the concentration of these in the eluate is often so low that the quantity cannot be measured even with modern analysis equipment.

The list of assessment criteria and critical limits for the leaching of hazardous substances from geosynthetics into water is one of the most extensive that is used with testing of building materials. The German rule (MGeokE, 2016, section 7.6) requires evaluation of the concentration of 26 chemicals. Based on the measurement results collected in Germany in recent years, it can be concluded that the critical limits were only reached in an incidental case, mostly caused by failures during production. By performing these tests on geosynthetics during the CE initial type testing procedure, the Certified Body assessing the test results will, after these directives come into effect, be able to ensure that a good polymer formulation has been selected. If a product does not meet the requirements, the product will not be approved, it cannot receive a CE mark and therefore cannot be placed on the European market or used in European building projects.

Application of the test CEN/TS 16637-2 and assessing its results based on the criteria laid down in Directive EU 2020/2184 on the quality of water for human consumption, as part of the CE initial type testing of geosynthetics will, after these directives come into effect, ensure that only geosynthetics are used in Europe that are safe for the environment.

8. Conclusions

8.1 GEOSYNTHETICS SHARE IN TOTAL PLASTIC USE

Geosynthetics belong to building materials used in environmental, civil and hydraulic engineering. They form 0.4 % of the total yearly use of plastic material in Europe. Geosynthetics are building materials, which can be removed adequately after end-of-life. They are robust and heavy compared to other plastic materials and are supplied and installed in large sheets, in contrast to consumer goods' plastics. Therefore, rest material from geosynthetics is nearly absent in small litter pieces or microplastics.

8.2 DEMOLITION AND REMOVAL OF GEOSYNTHETICS IS EXECUTABLE

Removal of geosynthetics after end-of-life is a matter of good practice for civil engineering contractors. However, it is advised that rules about it become a standard part of building contracts.

8.3 RECYCLING

Mechanical recycling is possible for geosynthetics. Promising are the chemical recycling techniques which would make it possible to upgrade used polymeric material to an acceptable level to be used as feed in the polymerisation process.

8.4 SUSTAINABLE EFFECTS OF THE USE OF GEOSYNTHETICS

Geosynthetics have considerable sustainability effects in the form of energy savings and reduction of CO₂ emissions. Compared to the use of other building materials, the use of geosynthetics will result in a reduction of embodied carbon and energy consumption due to the decrease in use of primary construction materials and due to the reduction of transport of building materials.

8.5 GEOSYNTHETICS ARE NOT A MAJOR SOURCE OF MICROPLASTICS.

The percentage of litter that can result from waste material of geosynthetics in the Netherlands is estimated to approx. 0.21 % of the quantity of waste material from geosynthetics and approx. 0,05 % of the yearly installed new geosynthetics. This litter will partly be removed by street or building site cleaning operations and can potentially partly end as microplastic parts in the environment.

8.6 RESPONSIBILITIES TO LIMIT THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

At the end-of-life of a structure, the geosynthetic material will have to be removed. In order to separate it properly, guidelines must be set and implemented for all phases of the application: during design (durable designs, appropriate and robust material selection), construction (responsible installation, handling of waste materials), maintenance (inspections to the well-behaviour of the structure, maintenance where needed) and removal (how to remove and recycle). A project owner can require that at the end of the service life of the structure, all geosynthetic materials need to be removed and recycled. The project owner has to include these requirements in the contract specifications and has to provide a budget for it. In this way, the forming of microplastics as result of the application of geosynthetics in earth structures is prevented.

8.7 LEACHING OF HARMFUL ELEMENTS FROM GEOSYNTHETICS

Leaching of harmful elements from the geosynthetics during the service life can theoretically take place. However, only materials that fulfill the strict

requirements on the quantities of leachate, based on the requirements listed in the EU directive for drinking water, are allowed to be used. In this way the environment is protected in accordance with the EU Construction Products Regulation EU 305/2011.

Application of the test CEN/TS 16637-2 and assessing its results based on the criteria laid down in Directive EU 2020/2184 on the quality of water for human consumption, as part of the CE initial type testing of geosynthetics will, after these directives come into effect, ensure that only geosynthetics are used in Europe that are safe for the environment.

8.8 EUROPEAN REGULATIONS

Geosynthetics may only be used after fulfilling the requirements of the EU Construction Products Regulation. This means tested according to the CEN requirements and the quality control procedures and supplied with a CE mark. In this way a good quality control system is in place which makes sure that the materials are applied in a safe way and do not form a risk for the environment.

8.9 NECESSARY UPDATE OF CEN NORMS

The use of post-industrial and post-consumers recycled polymer in the polymer compound of geosynthetics with a required service life of 5 years and more is not allowed according to the application norms EN 13249 – 13257 Annex B. The state of knowledge of the effects of the use of recycled polymer feedstock, whether or not mixed with virgin material, develops quickly. CE rules shall not forbid in general the use of recycled material when similar behaviour can be proven.

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