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Standard Recommendation
S.R. CEN/TR 15932:2010

Plastics - Recommendation for terminology and characterisation of biopolymers and bioplastics

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This document replaces:	*This document is based on:* CEN/TR 15932:2010	*Published:* 24 March, 2010

This document was published under the authority of the NSAI and comes into effect on: 5 May, 2010	ICS number: 01.040 83.080.01

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TECHNICAL REPORT

RAPPORT TECHNIQUE

TECHNISCHER BERICHT

CEN/TR 15932

March 2010

ICS 01.040; 83.080.01

English Version

Plastics - Recommendation for terminology and characterisation of biopolymers and bioplastics

Plastiques - Recommandations pour la terminologie et la caractérisation des biopolymères et bioplastiques

This Technical Report was approved by CEN on 17 August 2009. It has been drawn up by the Technical Committee CEN/TC 249.

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Ref. No. CEN/TR 15932:2010: E

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Contents

Page

Foreword 3

Introduction 4

1 Scope 5

2 Commonly used terms 5
2.1 “Bio”polymers: polymers based on renewable raw materials 5
2.1.1 General 5
2.1.2 Natural polymers from biomass 6
2.1.3 Synthetic polymers derived from biomass 6
2.2 “Bio”polymers: polymers exhibiting a “bio” - functionality 6
2.2.1 Polymers for biomedical applications 6
2.2.2 Biodegradable polymers 6
2.3 Consequences 7
2.4 Public perception 7

3 Standardisation needs 8
3.1 Recommendation for terminology 8
3.1.1 General 8
3.1.2 Definitions of terms 8
3.1.2.1 Organic material 8
3.1.2.2 Polymer 8
3.1.2.3 Plastic 8
3.1.2.4 Renewable resource 8
3.1.2.5 Biomass 8
3.1.2.6 Biobased 8
3.1.2.7 Biobased carbon content 9
3.1.2.8 Biomass content 9
3.1.2.9 Biocompatible 9
3.1.2.10 Biodegradable 9
3.1.2.11 Biobased polymer 9
3.1.2.12 Biocomposite 9
3.2 Standard test methods 9
3.3 Standard designation of the term biopolymer 10

Bibliography 12

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Foreword

This document (CEN/TR 15932:2010) has been prepared by Technical Committee CEN/TC 249 “Plastics”, the secretariat of which is held by NBN.

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Introduction

The main reason of the recent interest in bioplastics is due to the origin (i.e. use of biobased raw materials) or to the biodegradability of the final products, needed for instance for organic recovery. The use of biobased raw materials could be beneficial with reference to two current problems: fossil resources depletion and climate change. Today, regarding the latter issue, we have to manage the carbon in order to avoid its accumulation in atmosphere. Efficient use of all available resources and responsible utilization of renewable carbon is a way to participate to this reduction. Plastics are important materials which contribute significantly to environmental protection: thanks to their tailor-made properties (e.g. light weight, excellent insulation ability, tunable properties for optimum food protection, etc.) they reduce energy use by 26 % and reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 56 % across variety of applications compared to alternatives[1)].

The global manufacture of plastics in all applications only uses a small part of the entire consumed mineral oil: in Europe, it makes up only about 4 %[2)]. The major fraction (> 80 %) of the residual fossil material is used for energy production, predominantly for transportation and heating purposes. Besides crude oil, natural gas and coal, biomass is an additional raw material source for plastics.

The currently available biomass is consumed in different segments: food and feed production, power and heat generation, biofuel production and industrial applications (e.g. production of paper, fine chemicals). Due to the limited capacity of ecosystems, the utilization efficiency of renewable resources and availability issues have to be addressed across the whole bio-economy landscape. The eco-efficiency in this competitive use (e.g. energetic use vs. manufacture of goods) should always be in focus.

According to various scientists[3)], it would appear appropriate to use agricultural raw materials predominantly in a cascade of uses, instead of burning them directly in furnaces or engines. That would mean, for example, first producing a bioplastic from biomass: around 2 t to 10 t of bioplastic can be produced per hectare of agriculture land. The bioplastic thereby stores CO_2 in the form of vegetable carbon and removes it from atmosphere. It would be desirable to trap this CO_2 in the plastic for as long as possible. Finally, after maximum utilization including recycling when achievable and appropriate, the polymer can then be used either as energy source or as soil improver – to return the bound carbon to the natural cycle in the form of CO_2.

In order to ensure responsible and environmentally conscious use of natural (fossil and renewable) resources, a clear and unambiguous terminology is of particular importance.

1) GUA – Gesellschaft für umfassende Analysen, “The Contribution of Plastic Products to Resource Efficiency,” Vienna, 2005.

2) Plastics*Europe*, WG Market Research & Statistics, 2005.

3) Bioplastics - Renewable raw Materials and Climate Protection" (Kunststoffe International Journal October 2007, p; 109-115).

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1 Scope

This Technical Teport gives recommendations for bioplastics and biopolymers related terminology. These recommendations are based on a discussion of commonly used terms in this field.

This Technical Report also briefly describes the current test methods state of the art in relation to the characterization of bioplastics and products made thereof.

2 Commonly used terms

2.1 “Bio”polymers: polymers based on renewable raw materials

2.1.1 General

In this context, the “bio-“prefix is used as an abbreviation of “derived from biomass” or "obtained from renewable raw materials".

The term biopolymer then identifies polymers which derive from organic matter constituting living organisms and their residues[4)]. Biomass is considered as a renewable resource. A renewable resource is replenished by natural processes at a rate comparable to its exploitation rate. The carbon content of such polymers is derived from the so-called short carbon cycle (expected time frame: 1 year to 10 years; see Figure 1). Most industrial polymers and plastics are presently produced starting from fossil resources which are non-renewable as they cannot be replenished at a rate comparable to the exploitation rate (long carbon cycle, expected time frame to convert biomass to petroleum, gas and coal: >10^6 years).

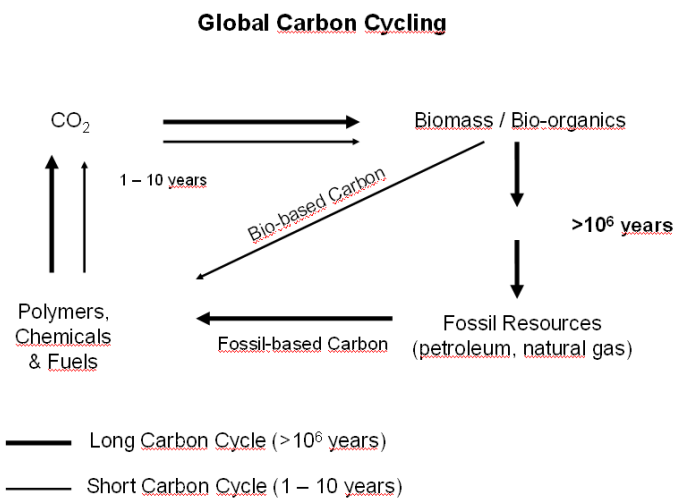

Figure 1 —Global Carbon Cycling[5)]

4) EC DECISION (2007/589/EC) of 18 July 2007: ‘biomass’ means non-fossilised and biodegradable organic material originating from plants, animals and micro-organisms.

5) Narayan, Ramani, Biobased and Biodegradable Materials, Rationale, Drivers & Technology exemplars, ACS (An American Chemical Society Publication) Symposium Ser., 939, Ch. 18, pg 282, (2006).

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