

APE Europe – Contribution to the Public Consultation on the Circular Economy Act

To improve Agri plastic circularity, APE Europe recommends setting voluntary or compulsory National Collection and Recycling Systems throughout the EU.

APE Europe – Position Paper on the EU Circular Economy Act

1. Improving Agri plastic circularity

APE Europe welcomes the European Commission’s initiative to accelerate the transition towards a circular economy under the new Clean Industrial Deal and the Competitiveness Compass framework. We strongly support the Act’s objectives of reducing dependence on primary raw materials, creating a genuine single market for secondary raw materials, and minimising environmental externalities.

Agricultural plastics – mulch films, greenhouse covers, silage films, nets, bale wrap, twine, irrigation pipes – are indispensable for modern farming. They enable higher yields, reduce pesticide and fertilizer use, improve water efficiency, and enhance climate resilience. Agricultural plastics play a vital role in ensuring the productivity and sustainability of European farming systems. Without these materials, farmers would have to revert to less efficient or more resource-intensive practices, resulting in lower yields, higher water and input consumption, and increased production costs. The objective should therefore not be to eliminate plastics from agriculture, but to make their use circular — by improving collection, recycling and design for recyclability.

APE Europe supports the introduction of mandatory voluntary or compulsory National Collection and Recycling schemes in all EU Member States, ensuring that all producers contribute fairly to the collection and recycling of agricultural plastics¹. However, the

¹ Taking into consideration that biodegradability in soil mulch film does not require any recovery or disposal operations at the end of the crop cycle.

organisation and governance of these schemes should be determined by the respective stakeholders involved, allowing existing successful national or private systems to continue operating as long as they comply with EU-wide criteria for coverage, traceability, financial sustainability and performance. The key objective is to enforce circularity while eliminating free-riders — all producers must participate in a recognised system — and maintaining flexibility for national models that have already demonstrated effectiveness. Therefore, frameworks must be put in place to compel all producers to join a system for collecting agricultural plastics in each EU country.

2. Updated Key Policy Recommendations

APE Europe underlines the importance of EU-wide harmonisation of End-of-Waste criteria, digital traceability of waste flows, and interoperability between national databases to ensure transparency and market confidence.

2.1 Harmonised Framework and Mandatory NCRS

APE Europe recommends the establishment of a mandatory European monitoring framework for agricultural plastics, recording marketed, collected, recycled, and reintegrated quantities. This should be coupled with the requirement that each Member State has to implement a voluntary or compulsory National Collection and Recycling System (NCRS)

Each Member State should be required to establish voluntary or compulsory National Collection and Recycling Systems for agricultural plastics, ensuring that all producers contribute fairly to collection and recycling efforts and that free-riding is eliminated. The organisation of the systems should remain flexible provided that they comply with EU-wide criteria for coverage, traceability, financial sustainability and progress towards circularity targets. Existing national collection schemes that already deliver these results should be recognised as equivalent, so that proven models can continue operating without disruption while ensuring a level playing field across the EU.

Principles for National Collection and Recycling Systems

To ensure consistency and fairness across Member States, APE Europe recommends that all National Collection and Recycling Systems (NCRS) operate according to common principles:

- Eco-fees that are calculated based on actual system costs – including collection, logistics, sorting, treatment and end-market conditions. While cost structures will differ among Member States due to variations in geography, market maturity and infrastructure, maintaining cost-reflectiveness and methodological consistency is essential to prevent free-riding and ensure fair competition within each national system. Eco-fee design should remain an industry-led process.
- Performance-based financing schemes that link financial incentives to measurable outcomes such as collection coverage, quality of returned material, and recycling efficiency.
- Digital reporting and monitoring systems that track quantities of products placed on the market, collected, and recycled – ensuring transparent, reliable, and comparable data across Member States.

2.2 Shared Governance – Ensuring Neutrality and Efficiency

Shared governance is the cornerstone of effective NCRS. All actors along the value chain must participate in decision-making, financing, and continuous improvement:

- Farmers prepare used plastics for collection (removal, sorting, cleanliness) and deliver them to approved aggregation points when applicable.
- Distributors act as operational interfaces, providing information, local collection points, and quality checks.
- Converters and importers finance totally or part of the system via eco-contributions applied on the new product, design products for recyclability with Post-Consumer Recycled content, report quantities placed on the market, and participate in governance bodies of the system to guarantee transparency.

This governance model ensures fair cost-sharing, avoids free-riding and competitive distortions, and secures long-term viability. Existing successful schemes (ADIVALOR/CPA – France, SvegRetur – Sweden, IFFPG – Ireland, ERDE – Germany...) should be recognised and integrated to protect prior investments and avoid duplications.

2.3 Investment in Recycling Capacity and Innovation

The EU should support investments in high-quality sorting, washing, and recycling infrastructure, as well as chemical recycling for complex plastics. Temporary public support should be available to reduce the initial difficulties of launching collection systems in

Member States that lack such systems. Mechanisms to stabilise markets for recycled materials should also be considered in order to ensure the economic sustainability of recycling companies. Mechanisms facilitating effective rollouts in Member States must be considered to foster recycle markets and, therefore, ensure the economic sustainability of recyclers.

2.4 Reducing Plastic Pollution and Protecting Soils

EU measures should be evidence-based and proportionate. Current studies indicate that external sources – such as sewage sludge, urban residues - are major contributors to microplastic contamination in soils, suggesting that the contribution from agricultural plastics appears relatively limited. However, further research is needed. Programmes should facilitate the adoption of improved removal and pre-treatment practices for used agricultural plastics (including systems such as RAFU and CleanFlex) to minimise soil contamination, and encourage the use of certified soil-biodegradable mulch films (EN 17033) and other biodegradable or compostable materials in high-risk applications. These actions should be coherent with the objectives of the EU Soil Monitoring and Resilience Directive to prevent soil degradation and plastic accumulation.

2.4 bis Biobased, Biodegradable and Compostable Agricultural Plastics

APE Europe recognises the growing interest in biobased, certified biodegradable and compostable agricultural plastic applications, not as substitutes for conventional plastics, but as complementary options that can contribute to the circular economy where specific conditions and/or end-of-life solutions justify their use.

While they should not be regarded as universal substitutes for conventional recyclable plastics, their market uptake can complement recycling efforts and contribute to decarbonisation objectives when applied under well-defined conditions. Their deployment must be based on compatibility with existing collection and recycling systems, and transparent labelling to avoid confusion or contamination of recycling streams.

To create a level playing field between fossil-based and non-fossil-based materials, the EU could explore proportionate and impact-assessed instruments — such as targeted eco-design requirements or incentives rewarding the use of recycled and/or renewable content – in line with the objectives of the forthcoming EU Soil Monitoring and Resilience Directive.

2.5 Economic and Social Balance

Coherence with the Waste Shipment Regulation (WSR)

The forthcoming delegated acts under the Waste Shipment Regulation (green-listing of specific waste streams) are closely linked to the objectives of the Circular Economy Act. Lessons learned from agricultural plastic waste — where high contamination levels do not correspond to environmental risk but generate disproportionate administrative costs — clearly demonstrate the need for harmonised end-of-waste criteria and a fully integrated single market for secondary raw materials. Ensuring coherence between both frameworks will help remove unnecessary administrative barriers, align definitions of waste and recyclates, and create stable conditions for investment in circular value chains.

Ensuring Competitiveness and Social Fairness

Current revenues on measures on plastics, such as those from ETS and Plastics levy, should be reinvested into dedicated EU or national fund (e.g. the Competitiveness Fund), to support the circularity of the plastic industry and promote the use of secondary raw material in products.

3. Alignment with APE Europe's Mission

- Agriculture: Provide farmers with the tools to maintain productivity and food quality.
- Plastics: Promote circular solutions through design for recycling, collection, and reintegration of recyclates.
- Environment: Prevent plastic leakage and improve soil and water health.

4. Operational Engagement Proposal

APE Europe is ready to play an active role in supporting the Commission and Member States by:

- Co-hosting a European Working Group on NCRS implementation.
- Organising webinars to share best practices and performance indicators.
- Contributing to the development of an EU sectoral label to reward best practices in agricultural plastics management.

5. Key Message

APE Europe stands ready to actively contribute to the Commission’s impact assessment phase and to the development of sectoral measures within the Circular Economy Act, ensuring that circular agricultural plastics are explicitly recognised as a priority material stream. We look forward to contributing to the forthcoming legislative proposal expected in late 2026.

About APE Europe

APE Europe (Agriculture, Plastics and Environment) is the European association dedicated to advancing sustainable use of plastics in agriculture. It brings together manufacturers, recyclers, researchers, and agricultural stakeholders across the value chain to promote circularity, reduce plastic leakage, and foster innovation. APE Europe works closely with policymakers, standardization bodies, and international organizations to develop evidence-based regulations, improve collection and recycling systems, and support the adoption of biodegradable and compostable solutions.

Through collaborative projects, technical studies, and advocacy, APE Europe provides a platform for knowledge sharing and drives collective action to ensure that agricultural plastics contribute positively to food security while minimizing environmental impacts.