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Parliamentary Under Secretary and spokesperson for Defra, Lord Taylor of Holbeach addressed the FPA Environment Seminar – 12th January 2012

Good afternoon, and welcome to what promises to be a very interesting seminar.

We live in a changing world with new challenges and new technologies.

As our lives have changed, so has our attitude to our environment. We all are now conscious of the pressures we're placing on it.

This awareness is across the board. Indeed it is remarkable the degree to which a consensus has been developed.

As a result we're recycling more, insulating our roofs, throwing away less food, switching off electrical equipment, driving less and using public transport more.

These are all positive steps as we look to move our economy and our society forward, transforming it from one of waste and inefficiency to a greener, more sustainable model. A model that supports strong business investment. A model that creates the right conditions for innovation and entrepreneurs to flourish, where cleaner technologies are developed and resources are used more efficiently. Where our daily lives play an active part in preserving and improving our environment, and safeguarding it for future generations.

For many of us when we think about improving our environmental performance we look at how we handle waste. It's an everyday task that enables us 'to do our bit'.

For some of us, we've got rather good at it. In the last decade we've seen a fourfold increase in household recycling. Business recycling rates have followed a similar pattern and the waste hierarchy – reduce, reuse, recycle – has become embedded in our consciousness.

These are all real achievements. But as with many things in life we can and should want to do better. All of us need to stop thinking of waste as an unavoidable by-product of modern life. Instead we should look for opportunities to reduce waste and look at that which is produced as a resource. One that can offer real economic value.

We published our Waste Review last year, setting out our aims of achieving a zero waste economy and the steps we'll need to take to get there.

We want an economy where waste is minimised, and where, if it can't be avoided, it's treated as a resource, rather than something to be disposed of, and where making the right waste management decisions helps the environment and helps the green economy to grow.

We need to work in partnership to achieve this: central and local governments, industry, communities and civil society organisations all have a stake in making this happen.

The members of the FPA have a key role to play in this. How packaging is designed and manufactured has a significant role to play in the amount of waste that is produced. Preventing waste from arising in the first place is at the top of the waste hierarchy and can save consumers and businesses money.

By considering how packaging is designed and avoiding unnecessary packaging, we can prevent wastage. Ensuring it can be easily recycled then helps minimise the impact of the waste that is produced.

For example, as part of the Home Improvement Sector Agreement, B&Q have reduced the amount of packaging used in key areas. In particular they have introduced reusable carrier packs for the delivery of kitchen worktops. Not only has this reduced the environmental impact of packaging, removing 1,200 tonnes of cardboard from the chain it has also saved B&Q more than £1m in packaging costs.

Another example is Heinz, who have reduced the thickness of their easy open can ends and saved 1,400 tonnes of steel as well as reducing CO2 emissions by 585 tonnes.

These are clear examples of how businesses can improve their competitiveness. These are the "quick wins". Straightforward efficiency savings that are possible and practical now.

We welcome where the industry have made progress but there is still more that can be done to reduce unnecessary packaging and increase recycling rates.

One of the ways Government is helping to push the agenda is through packaging targets. As many of you will know, we launched a consultation on 16th December on increasing the recovery and recycling targets for packaging waste.

This follows on from the commitment made in the Waste Review last year and is in line with the Government's commitment to be the greenest ever. We believe that the proposed new targets are stretching but achievable and offer an opportunity for us to build on the impressive achievements to date.

The new targets have been set to provide the maximum environmental benefit, hence the increases in materials with a large carbon footprint such as aluminium and plastic, whilst keeping overall costs as low possible.

These proposals will also deliver an economic benefit, as well as an environmental one. We currently landfill around 4m tonnes of packaging waste, which should be regarded as a resource to be used.

With recycled material in demand across markets, the value of the material we continue to throw away is huge and we should be seeking to capture and use these resources.

The closing date of the consultation is 10th February and I would urge as many of you as possible to reply and give your views and expertise.

Many of you here today produce and provide packaging to retailers and brands, and through them and through the Courtauld Commitment; through the responsibility deal with the home improvement sector, and in future through working with other sectors like hospitality and food service, we are ensuring businesses play their part in preventing waste.

Effective Government collaboration with businesses is hugely important. In areas where it has worked, like Courtauld, we'll continue.

Where progress hasn't been so good, we do want to consider other options – for example progress in reducing the number of carrier bags given out was initially good but has stalled in the last year.

Defra and the Devolved Administrations are working with WRAP to develop a new UK wide voluntary agreement with the hospitality and foodservice sector on food and packaging waste.

Research shows that food and packaging waste represent the greatest proportion of the 3.4 million tonnes of waste that is produced by hotels, pubs and restaurants in the UK every year. Our new agreement will seek both to prevent this waste, and to manage the waste that does arise more sustainably.

WRAP will help signatories to deliver the agreement, by conducting analysis and research to develop best practice, carrying out waste prevention reviews and collecting data at larger firms and developing consumer and staff resource packs on reducing food waste.

The benefits of this agreement are both financial and environmental. We predict net social benefits worth £123 million to 2015 including the prevention of emissions equivalent to 570,000 tonnes of CO₂. There will not only be strong environmental benefits. We predict that businesses in the sector will realise financial savings worth £76 million.

There are other benefits too, including meeting clients' and consumers' growing sustainability expectations, sharing common goals to deliver change across the sector faster than individuals working alone, and driving innovation in the sector with support from all four UK Governments.

I know that the FPA has worked with WRAP on the development of this agreement – both through stakeholder events and by urging members to respond to the recent industry discussion paper. I would encourage the FPA to continue to be proactive on this issue and to sign up as supporters who will help the sector deliver against its targets.

This agreement recognises the need to reduce packaging waste, but also understands that some packaging protects food and can reduce food waste, therefore preventing greater environmental damage. We have proposed measuring progress against the prevention target in the agreement in equivalent CO₂ emissions. This means that meeting the target will be best achieved by making efficient tradeoffs between food and packaging waste reduction and avoids the creation of conflicting food and packaging targets.

We want to see more schemes like this. In the Waste Review we committed to developing a range of measures to encourage waste prevention and reuse. To explore responsibility deals to raise recycling levels for metal and plastic packaging. We will need your help in achieving these ambitions.

The findings from a series of trials funded by WRAP show it could soon be technically possible to recycle almost all plastic packaging waste.

We must work towards making this finding a reality.

The environmental benefits of recycling plastic packaging are significant. For every tonne of plastic packaging recycled between 1 and 1.5 tonnes of CO₂ equivalent is saved from being emitted into the Earth's atmosphere.

There are challenges to be overcome on this journey such as how we can collect films without contaminating other waste streams, detecting and sorting black plastics, and a lack of markets for non-bottle plastic. It is vital that we make sure we get the economics right.

Defra has begun work through its Advisory Committee on Packaging to explore the possibility of a Responsibility Deal with the plastic packaging industry aimed at overcoming

these challenges. This work has drawn in representatives from the waste management industry, packaging manufacturers, retailers, reprocessors and local authorities.

All these sectors are now working together to see if there is a solution which will provide a benefit to everyone in the chain as well as a benefit to the environment and UK plc.

I am confident that the industry working together with WRAP are in the best place to find a solution which will help the UK to improve its plastic packaging recycling rate.

We are looking to do the same with metals. The challenges are different but the opportunities are the same and we must adopt a similar approach of working together to realise these opportunities.

So, the Waste Review has set out our ambitions, and the framework required for achieving them – and I've touched on just a couple. We've looked at all aspects of waste policy, making radical changes in some areas and, where policy is working, continuing down those lines.

Ultimately there is a lot more work to be done. But it's not just for one single player, nor is there a silver bullet, but by working together in partnership and by working through the supply chain, we can work with you, and others to translate our vision into reality.

For my own part, I cannot deny that I have found this a difficult and complex part of my brief to master. I expect many of you too find it likewise. But the Waste Review has given us a roadmap and it is the shared sense of purpose I get from the industry which makes me confident that we will meet the challenge.

Thank you.