



Challenge: Zero Plastic Waste by 2030

Ajinomoto Co., Inc. Takes on Another Challenge

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest in plastic waste, both in mass media and in social media. In particular, plastic waste in our oceans has been a hot topic, as well as the existence of “microplastic,” defined as particles of plastic less than 5mm in length¹. Microplastic consists of microfibers from synthetic fabrics, microbeads used in some hygiene and beauty categories, and other tiny plastic particles that result from the degradation of larger pieces of plastic over time.



Of course, this is not an entirely new issue. For decades, countless people and companies around the world have been following the “reduce, reuse, recycle” approach, which aims to reduce plastic waste by decreasing the amount of plastic that is required as well as the amount that’s thrown away. But plastic waste is a stubborn problem—like plastic itself, it never seems to go away.

Plastic facts you should know

- Plastic production worldwide has increased from 2 million tons in 1950 to 380 million tons in 2015²
- Of the 7.8 billion tons of plastic produced between 1950 and 2015, about half has been produced in the last 13 years²
- The increase in plastic production is rising faster than the increase in world population

Reducing Plastic Production

If you think about it, the “three R’s”—reduce, reuse, and recycle—are listed in order of difficulty, from easiest to hardest. As a global food product manufacturer, Ajinomoto Co. has been focusing on reducing plastic production for many years.

Since the year 2000, our plastic reduction efforts have reached 72 of our products, resulting in an annual reduction of plastic use by about 3,500 tons. To visualize how large that amount is, consider that an average Asian elephant weighs 2.5 to 5.5 tons. So we have reduced plastic use by the equivalent of the weight of 1,000 elephants per year³.

In some cases, plastic can be replaced by another material. For example, by changing our “HON-DASHI®” flavor seasoning product’s packaging from plastic to paper, we were able to avoid producing 11 tons of plastic each year.

In other cases, when the use of plastic is essential in terms of product safety and shelf life, but with the improvement of product shape and filling method, more compact (light weight) packaging can still be considered. For example, in our “Blendy® Café Latory®” instant coffee product, we were able to reduce the length of the “stick” packages by 20mm, leading to another reduction of 20 tons of plastic.

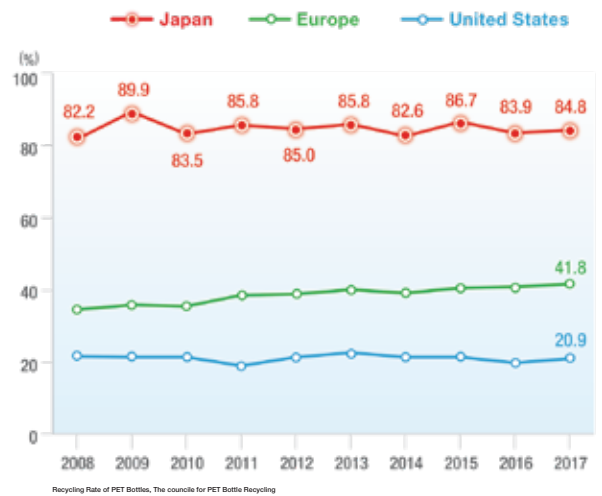
The list goes on and on, and the products we have targeted are not only in the Japanese market—we were able to eliminate more than 2,000 tons of plastic per year by redesigning the portion size of our “Masako®” seasoning product, which is marketed in Indonesia.



■ Examples of plastic reduction in the Ajinomoto Group's products



■ PET bottle recycling rates



What about “reuse”?

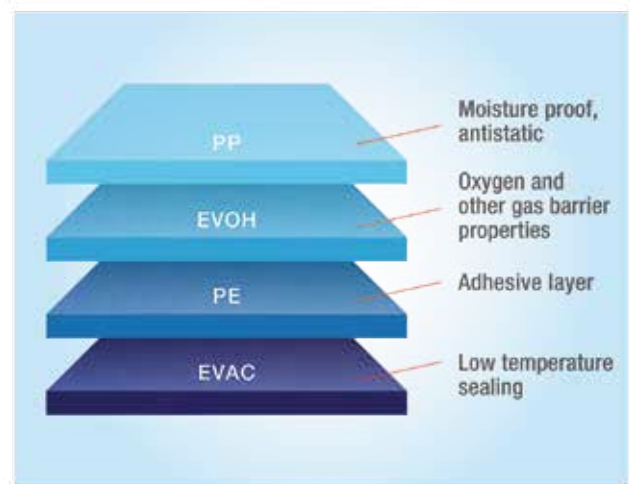
“Reuse,” the second of the “Three R’s,” is a great idea—if the material is right. For example, we reuse glass all the time, because it’s strong and easy to clean. Of course, durable plastic items such as cafeteria trays and lawn chairs are used many times. But single-use plastics, including PET bottles, are not appropriate for reuse in terms of strength and hygiene.

On the other hand, the plastic used in food packaging is much harder to recycle. The primary function of this plastic is to ensure the safety of food, which also results in reduced food loss. This involves providing a barrier against bacteria, moisture, ultraviolet light, and other potential “food spoilers.” To achieve this function, the plastic used in food packaging consists of multiple, dissimilar layers. Therefore, it cannot simply be compacted together and used again the way that PET bottles can.

Recycling: The Biggest Challenge

Unfortunately, reducing plastic use is not enough to eliminate plastic waste. To reach our goal, we must place a strong focus on recycling. For most people, recycling plastic probably doesn’t seem very difficult. Just your PET bottles from the rest of the garbage, and a truck comes and takes everything away. But the truth is that plastic recycling is a lot more complicated than most people think. The reason is that there are many different types of plastic, and there are various ways in which they can be recycled.

■ Example of plastic layer types and functions in food packaging



Among the varieties of plastic, PET bottles are relatively simple to recycle. The reason is that PET bottles uniformly consist of just one type of plastic—polyethylene terephthalate (which is what PET stands for). Therefore, PET bottles can be compacted together and then used to make new bottles, or other materials and products such as fabric, other plastic items like cafeteria trays, and even stationery goods⁴.

More plastic facts you should know

- Plastic used for packaging accounts for 42% of total plastic production.²
- As of 2015, 79% of the plastic ever produced is now in landfills or in the natural environment, 12% has been incinerated, and only 9% has been recycled.²

As a result, the recycling rate of PET bottles is relatively higher than other types of plastic—85% in Japan, 42% in Europe, and 21% in the United States.



Innovation in Plastic Recycling

Researchers and scientists the world over are exploring new avenues to solve this problem. One promising avenue is the development of new materials. Recently, biodegradable plastic made from cassava recently captured the attention and imagination of the media, with the potential of replacing the non-degradable plastic bags commonly used in supermarkets and convenience stores. Unfortunately, biodegradable plastic has low biostability—in other words, it is sensitive to degradation by biological agents. This makes it unsuitable for food packaging, in which the plastic must act as a barrier against biological agents. Furthermore, for practical reasons, solubility is not necessarily a desirable quality for the plastics used in food packaging⁵.

■ Plastics management in the circular economy



Another approach is to consider different ways of recycling. There are three major methods: material recycling (recycling to plastic materials), chemical recycling (recycling to plastic raw materials), and energy recovery (recovery as energy). Although each method has strengths and weaknesses, Ajinomoto Co. pays attention to all innovations and developments that can offer practical and positive solutions as we drive towards elimination of plastic waste. Ultimately, we believe that the best solutions will be those that contribute to a “circular economy” that minimizes waste and optimizes the use of existing resources.

Working Independently and in Cooperation

Reducing plastic waste to zero by the year 2030 requires a monumental effort, and it cannot be achieved by any one corporation. That’s why Ajinomoto Co. is actively

seeking partnerships. For example, we are a charter member of CLOMA—the Clean Oceans Material Alliance—which was established earlier this year by industry, government, and research institutes. CLOMA is taking a multi-faceted approach to change the “plastic ecosystem,” including the behavior of individuals, through a combination of innovation, collaboration, and promotional activities.

Ajinomoto Co. has implemented meaningful reductions in the amount of plastic we use by rethinking our packaging, product by product. Of course, this effort will continue. In addition, we are putting forth a comprehensive effort to recycle as much of the plastic as is technologically possible.

We firmly believe that through a combination of our cooperative and independent efforts, we will fulfill our responsibility to help create “the circular economy” that will sustainably help people to eat well and live well, well into the future.

About Ajinomoto Co., Inc.

The Ajinomoto Group is a global leader in amino acids thanks to its advanced bioscience and fine chemical technologies. Its products cover a range of fields such as seasonings, processed foods, beverages, amino acids, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals. Since discovering “umami” (the fifth basic taste, created by glutamic acid, a type of amino acid) in 1908, we have been scientifically pursuing the possibilities of amino acids, and supporting the healthy lives of people all around the world. Based on our corporate message “Eat Well, Live Well.” we aim for further growth and continuous contribution to greater wellness for people by creating value with communities and society. The Ajinomoto Group has offices in 35 countries and regions, and sells products in more than 130 countries and regions. Its sales were 1.127 trillion yen (10.2 billion U.S. dollars) in fiscal year 2018. To learn more, visit <https://www.ajinomoto.com/>.

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