

Unilever backs sustainability promise with R50m biomass boiler

Boiler sees over 30% reduction in CO₂ at Maydon Wharf Factory

Durban, 5 June 2018 — South Africa's largest fast-moving consumer goods manufacturer, Unilever, unveiled a R50-million biomass boiler at its historic Maydon Wharf Factory in Durban.

At an event marking World Environment Day, attended by Deputy Minister of Environmental Affairs Barbara Thomson and KZN MEC for Economic Development, Tourism & Environmental Affairs Sihle Zikalala, Unilever South Africa Executive Vice President Luc-Olivier Marquet explained that the biomass boiler that will reduce CO₂ emissions, waste-to-landfill, and ultimately the amount of electricity used in production at Maydon Wharf.

At the launch, Marquet spoke of the company's global commitment to ensuring that all of its plastic packaging will be fully reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2025. "This undertaking has been made because of growing concerns about plastic pollution – and because it is the right thing to do. In 2017 we made an industry leading commitment to ensure that all our plastic packaging is designed to be fully reusable, recyclable, or compostable by 2025. We will also increase the recycled plastic content in our packaging to 25% by 2025.

"Our new biomass boiler at Maydon Wharf is illustrative of the seriousness of our commitment to sustainable living. We have previously unveiled our Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP), which commits to reducing our environmental impact by half by 2020. This can only be achieved by putting sustainability at the core of our strategy. An important part of achieving these goals is to manage our electricity and water use, and to ensure that no non-hazardous waste goes to landfill. The biomass boiler is our latest step on this journey," said Marquet.

The boiler is fuelled by wooden pallets, waste wood and off-cuts from local furniture and door manufacturers. Wooden pallets used as part of business-as-usual by Unilever are reused, and do not form parts of the biomass feed. The boiler consumes on average 940 tonnes of biomass a month – roughly the weight of 375 medium-size African elephants!

"By introducing this fossil fuel-free machinery into our factory, we are taking a step towards reducing the amount of wooden waste traditionally sent to landfill sites. The boiler cost R50m to install, and we estimate that it will provide a saving per annum of around R17m per year. This figure factors in fuel savings, and will reduce the facility's carbon footprint. The boiler will lead to a reduction of over 30% in CO₂ emissions and is projected to save 14,000 tons of CO₂ every year," said Marquet.

"If sustainability is integrated into the very core of our business, it's far more likely that we will make our planning for making changes a success. We don't view it as a 'nice to have', but rather, as a purpose-led business, it is essential for our social impact," said Marquet.

The success of the biomass boiler will not be the end of Unilever's environmental efforts at Maydon Wharf: the company is actively looking at the re-use of condensate, heat, water waste and flash steam in its factories, as well as new soap-making technologies that use less energy in production. Further, the company is examining the feasibility of a new Drier Vacuum and solar power.