

Professor Peter Ragaert of Ghent University is a technological advisor at Pack4Food, a non-profit that encourages innovation in food packaging

How is Pack4Food improving the quality of food packaging?

We unite 65 companies and 10 research centres, mainly from Flanders. One of our principal tasks is to improve communication between all participants in the value chain: food producers, packaging developers and factories filling the packages with food. We organise networking activities, set up training programmes and provide advice on best practice and innovations. But we are also increasingly initiating research projects. Our work is mostly financed with subsidies from the Flemish Agency for Innovation through Science and Technology.

Can you explain your recent research project on bioplastics?

Because of the importance of sustainability, we examined the possibilities of developing plastics with renewable resources. Some bioplastics are also compostable, further reducing their ecological footprint. Using, for example, corn instead of petroleum to make plastics could be more eco-friendly, but what is better is to create plastics from waste – such as the starch that remains in the water in which companies cut potatoes to make chips. We have noticed a lot of interest among companies in the food packaging business and other sectors, such as car manufacturers. Unfortunately, bioplastics are still more costly than ordinary plastics, which explains why their introduction takes time.



Apart from sustainability, what are the main concerns about food packaging?

Companies are looking to limit the decay of food through more efficient

packaging because consumers are increasingly suspicious of additives, which help to preserve the food. Another goal is to make packaging more user-friendly, especially for the aging population, but also for busy people who want a microwave meal in packaging that makes the preparation as easy as possible. A third trend is smart packaging, which provides more information on the remaining shelf life, for instance. One innovation is a label that changes colour in case of a temperature rise and thus a reduction of the shelf life. Because of the high cost, this technology is not yet used for consumer products but only during large transports of food. Interview by Andy Furniere