

Use of plastic waste in road construction: A review

Madhu ^{1,*} and Sateesh Gaonkar ²

¹ Department of Civil Engineering, Government Polytechnic, Raichur (117), Karnataka, India.

² Department of Civil Engineering, Government Polytechnic, Karwar (114), Karnataka, India.

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Abstract

The increasing accumulation of plastic waste has become a global environmental concern, necessitating innovative approaches for waste management and sustainable construction practices. This review examines the utilization of plastic waste in road construction as a promising solution that addresses both environmental challenges and infrastructure development needs. The incorporation of plastic waste in road construction has gained significant attention due to its potential to enhance pavement properties while reducing environmental pollution. Various forms of plastic waste, including polyethylene terephthalate (PET), high-density polyethylene (HDPE), and polypropylene (PP), have been successfully integrated into different road construction applications. The paper synthesizes research findings from multiple studies conducted before 2019, highlighting the technical feasibility, environmental benefits, and economic implications of plastic waste utilization in road infrastructure.

Keywords: Plastic waste; Road construction; Bituminous mixtures; Asphalt modification; Sustainable construction; Waste management

1. Introduction

The global plastic production has witnessed exponential growth over the past few decades, reaching approximately 348 million tons in 2017, with a significant portion ending up as waste in landfills and natural environments (Plastics Europe, 2018). This mounting plastic waste crisis has prompted researchers and engineers to explore innovative recycling and reuse strategies that can transform waste into valuable construction materials. The construction industry, being one of the largest consumers of raw materials worldwide, presents substantial opportunities for incorporating recycled materials, particularly in road construction applications where large volumes of materials are required.

Road construction traditionally relies on conventional materials such as aggregates, bitumen, and cement, which are often sourced from natural deposits and involve energy-intensive production processes. The increasing cost of these materials, coupled with environmental concerns related to their extraction and processing, has motivated the search for alternative materials. Plastic waste, with its inherent durability, water resistance, and mechanical properties, emerges as a potential substitute or additive in road construction materials. The concept of using plastic waste in road construction gained momentum in the early 2000s, with several pilot projects demonstrating promising results.

The integration of plastic waste in road construction offers multiple advantages, including waste reduction, resource conservation, and potential improvement in pavement performance. Various approaches have been developed for incorporating plastic waste into road construction, ranging from direct addition to aggregates to chemical modification of bitumen. These methods have shown potential for enhancing road durability, reducing maintenance costs, and contributing to sustainable development goals. However, the successful implementation of plastic waste in road construction requires careful consideration of technical, environmental, and economic factors.

* Corresponding author: Madhu

Early research efforts focused primarily on laboratory investigations to understand the behavior of plastic-modified road materials under different loading and environmental conditions. These studies established fundamental knowledge about the compatibility of various plastic types with conventional road construction materials. The findings from these initial investigations paved the way for field trials and demonstration projects that validated the practical feasibility of plastic waste utilization in real-world road construction scenarios.

The heterogeneous nature of plastic waste presents both opportunities and challenges for road construction applications. Different plastic types exhibit varying physical and chemical properties, which influence their suitability for specific applications. Understanding these variations is crucial for developing effective processing techniques and quality control measures. The development of standardized procedures for plastic waste preparation, characterization, and incorporation has been a key focus area in advancing this technology.

This comprehensive review aims to synthesize the existing knowledge on plastic waste utilization in road construction, examining the various methodologies, performance characteristics, and implementation challenges. The review covers research findings from studies conducted before 2019, providing a solid foundation for understanding the current state of technology and identifying future research directions. The ultimate goal is to facilitate the widespread adoption of plastic waste in road construction, contributing to both environmental sustainability and infrastructure development.

2. Types of Plastic Waste and Their Properties

Plastic waste suitable for road construction applications encompasses a wide range of polymer types, each with distinct characteristics that influence their performance in construction applications. Polyethylene terephthalate (PET), commonly found in beverage bottles and food containers, represents one of the most abundant plastic waste streams globally. PET exhibits excellent chemical resistance, good mechanical properties, and thermal stability, making it suitable for road construction applications. Research conducted by Vasudevan and Sekar (2011) demonstrated that PET waste could be effectively incorporated into bituminous mixtures, resulting in improved Marshall stability and flow characteristics.

High-density polyethylene (HDPE) and low-density polyethylene (LDPE) constitute another significant category of plastic waste utilized in road construction. HDPE, commonly found in milk jugs, detergent bottles, and shopping bags, offers superior chemical resistance and durability compared to LDPE. The crystalline structure of HDPE provides enhanced mechanical strength, while its hydrophobic nature contributes to improved moisture resistance in road applications. Studies by Sharma and Sharma (2013) indicated that HDPE incorporation in bituminous mixtures resulted in increased tensile strength and reduced rutting potential.

Polypropylene (PP) waste, sourced from packaging materials, automotive components, and textiles, presents unique advantages for road construction due to its excellent fatigue resistance and thermal stability. PP exhibits good compatibility with bitumen and can withstand repeated loading cycles without significant degradation. The polymer's ability to maintain its properties at elevated temperatures makes it particularly suitable for regions with high ambient temperatures. Research by Gawande et al. (2012) showed that PP-modified bitumen demonstrated improved performance characteristics in terms of penetration, softening point, and ductility.

Polystyrene (PS) waste, including expanded polystyrene (EPS) from packaging applications and rigid polystyrene from disposable items, has been investigated for road construction applications. PS offers lightweight characteristics and good insulation properties, which can be beneficial for specific road construction scenarios. However, the brittle nature of PS requires careful consideration during processing and incorporation. Studies by Ahmadiania et al. (2011) explored the use of waste polystyrene in asphalt mixtures, demonstrating potential improvements in mixture stability while maintaining workability.

Mixed plastic waste, representing the most commonly available form of plastic waste in municipal solid waste streams, presents both opportunities and challenges for road construction applications. The heterogeneous nature of mixed plastic waste requires appropriate sorting and processing techniques to ensure consistent quality and performance.

Research by Zhu et al. (2014) investigated the use of mixed plastic waste in asphalt applications, developing processing protocols that could accommodate variations in plastic composition while maintaining acceptable performance standards.

The thermal behavior of different plastic types plays a crucial role in determining their suitability for road construction applications. The melting temperatures, thermal stability, and degradation characteristics of various plastics influence the processing conditions and long-term performance of plastic-modified road materials. Understanding these thermal properties is essential for developing appropriate mixing procedures and quality control measures. Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of key properties for different plastic waste types commonly used in road construction.

Table 1 Properties of Different Plastic Waste Types for Road Construction

Plastic Type	Melting Point (°C)	Density (g/cm ³)	Tensile Strength (MPa)	Chemical Resistance	Thermal Stability
PET	250-260	1.38-1.40	55-75	Excellent	High
HDPE	125-135	0.94-0.97	20-35	Excellent	Moderate
LDPE	105-115	0.91-0.93	8-25	Good	Moderate
PP	160-170	0.90-0.91	30-40	Excellent	High
PS	100-120	1.04-1.06	35-50	Fair	Low

3. Processing Techniques and Methodologies

The successful incorporation of plastic waste into road construction materials requires well-designed processing techniques that ensure proper dispersion, compatibility, and performance. The dry process method represents one of the most widely adopted approaches for incorporating plastic waste into road construction. In this method, shredded plastic waste is directly mixed with heated aggregates at temperatures ranging from 160°C to 180°C, allowing the plastic to coat the aggregate particles and form a binding matrix. Research by Verma (2008) demonstrated that the dry process could achieve uniform plastic distribution while maintaining the workability of the mixture.

The wet process method involves the modification of bitumen by adding plastic waste at elevated temperatures, typically between 150°C and 180°C, followed by continuous stirring to achieve homogeneous mixing. This approach allows for better chemical interaction between the plastic and bitumen, potentially resulting in improved adhesion and performance characteristics. Studies by Awwad and Shbeeb (2007) showed that the wet process could produce more stable plastic-bitumen blends compared to dry mixing methods, although it required more sophisticated equipment and energy input.

Mechanical shredding and grinding techniques play a crucial role in preparing plastic waste for road construction applications. The particle size distribution of processed plastic significantly influences the mixing behavior, workability, and final performance of plastic-modified materials. Optimal particle sizes typically range from 2mm to 6mm for most road construction applications, balancing the need for adequate surface area and avoiding processing difficulties. Research by Sabina et al. (2016) investigated the effects of plastic particle size on mixture properties, establishing guidelines for optimal size gradation.

Chemical modification techniques have been explored to enhance the compatibility between plastic waste and conventional road construction materials. These methods involve the use of coupling agents, compatibilizers, or chemical treatments to improve the interfacial bonding between plastic and other components. The addition of coupling agents such as maleic anhydride-grafted polymers can significantly improve the adhesion between plastic waste and bitumen. Studies by Zani et al. (2017) demonstrated that chemical modification could enhance the mechanical properties and durability of plastic-modified road materials.

Temperature control during processing represents a critical factor in achieving successful plastic waste incorporation. The processing temperature must be carefully selected to ensure adequate plastic softening and flow while avoiding thermal degradation. Different plastic types require specific temperature ranges for optimal processing, necessitating the development of tailored processing protocols. Research by Moura et al. (2018) established temperature guidelines for various plastic waste types, optimizing the balance between workability and material properties.

Quality control measures during processing are essential to ensure consistent performance of plastic-modified road materials. These measures include monitoring particle size distribution, assessing mixing uniformity, controlling processing temperatures, and evaluating the final product properties. The development of standardized testing procedures and acceptance criteria has been crucial for the practical implementation of plastic waste in road construction. Table 2 summarizes the key processing parameters for different incorporation methods.

Table 2 Processing Parameters for Plastic Waste Incorporation Methods

Method	Temperature Range (°C)	Mixing Time (min)	Plastic Content (%)	ParticleSize (mm)	Equipment Required
Dry Process	160-180	3-5	5-12	2-6	Conventional mixer
Wet Process	150-180	10-20	3-8	1-4	Modified plant
Chemical Modified	140-170	15-30	4-10	2-5	Specialized reactor

4. Performance Characteristics and Engineering Properties

The incorporation of plastic waste in road construction significantly influences the mechanical and physical properties of the resulting materials, with implications for pavement performance, durability, and service life. Marshall stability, a key parameter in asphalt mixture design, typically shows improvement with plastic waste addition. Studies by Rokade (2012) demonstrated that plastic waste incorporation could increase Marshall stability by 15-40% compared to conventional mixtures, depending on the plastic type and content. The enhanced stability is attributed to the binding effect of melted plastic, which acts as an additional binder and improves aggregate interlocking.

Flow characteristics of plastic-modified mixtures exhibit complex behavior that depends on plastic type, content, and processing conditions. Generally, plastic waste incorporation tends to reduce flow values, indicating stiffer mixture behavior. However, the flow reduction must be balanced to maintain adequate workability during construction. Research by Panda and Mazumdar (2002) showed that optimal plastic contents ranging from 6% to 12% by weight of bitumen could achieve the desired balance between stability and flow characteristics.

Indirect tensile strength represents another crucial parameter that demonstrates significant improvement with plastic waste incorporation. The enhanced tensile strength contributes to improved crack resistance and fatigue performance of pavements. Studies by Jain and Singh (2018) reported tensile strength increases of 20-50% for plastic-modified mixtures compared to control samples. The improvement is attributed to the formation of a polymer network within the bitumen matrix, which provides additional resistance to tensile stresses.

Rutting resistance, a critical performance parameter for pavements subjected to heavy traffic loads, shows considerable enhancement with plastic waste incorporation. The improved rutting resistance is primarily due to the increased stiffness and viscosity of plastic-modified binders at elevated temperatures. Research by Singh et al. (2017) demonstrated that plastic-modified pavements exhibited 30-60% reduction in rutting potential compared to conventional pavements under accelerated loading conditions.

Fatigue resistance, representing the ability of pavement materials to withstand repeated loading cycles, benefits significantly from plastic waste incorporation. The polymer network formed by plastic waste provides enhanced flexibility and stress distribution capabilities, leading to improved fatigue life. Studies by Moghaddam et al. (2011) showed that plastic-modified mixtures could achieve 2-4 times longer fatigue life compared to conventional mixtures under controlled laboratory conditions.

Moisture susceptibility, a critical factor affecting pavement durability in wet climates, generally shows improvement with plastic waste incorporation. The hydrophobic nature of most plastic types contributes to reduced water absorption and enhanced resistance to moisture-induced damage. However, the improvement depends on the quality of plastic-aggregate coating and the presence of additives. Table 3 presents a comparative analysis of performance characteristics for different plastic-modified mixtures.

Table 3 Performance Characteristics of Plastic-Modified Road Materials

Property	Conventional Mix	PET Modified	HDPE Modified	PP Modified	Mixed Plastic
Marshall Stability (kN)	8.5-12.0	10.2-15.6	9.8-14.8	11.1-16.2	9.5-14.2
Flow (mm)	2.5-4.0	2.0-3.2	2.2-3.5	1.8-3.0	2.1-3.4
Tensile Strength (MPa)	1.2-1.8	1.5-2.4	1.4-2.2	1.6-2.6	1.3-2.1
Rutting Resistance (%)	Base (100)	130-165	125-155	140-175	120-150
Fatigue Life (cycles)	50,000-80,000	85,000-180,000	75,000-160,000	95,000-200,000	70,000-150,000

5. Environmental Impact and Sustainability Assessment

The environmental benefits of utilizing plastic waste in road construction extend beyond simple waste diversion from landfills and incineration facilities. Life cycle assessment studies conducted by various researchers have demonstrated significant reductions in carbon footprint and environmental impact when plastic waste is incorporated into road construction materials. Chiu et al. (2008) conducted a comprehensive life cycle analysis comparing conventional asphalt pavements with plastic-modified pavements, revealing potential reductions of 15-25% in greenhouse gas emissions over the pavement lifecycle.

Energy consumption analysis reveals that plastic waste utilization in road construction can contribute to overall energy savings despite the additional processing requirements. The energy savings are primarily attributed to reduced demand for virgin materials, decreased transportation requirements for waste disposal, and extended pavement service life. Research by Farina et al. (2017) estimated energy savings of 10-20% for plastic-modified pavements compared to conventional pavements when considering the entire material production and construction process.

The reduction in landfill burden represents one of the most direct environmental benefits of plastic waste utilization in road construction. Given the large volumes of materials required for road construction projects, substantial quantities of plastic waste can be diverted from disposal facilities. Studies by Mahesh et al. (2017) calculated that a single kilometer of four-lane highway could potentially utilize 500-800 tons of plastic waste, depending on the pavement design and plastic content. This level of waste diversion can significantly contribute to municipal waste management objectives.

Water pollution prevention emerges as an important environmental benefit, as plastic waste incorporation in roads prevents potential leaching and migration of plastic particles into water systems. The encapsulation of plastic waste within the pavement structure provides a controlled environment that prevents environmental release while maintaining the structural integrity of the waste material. Long-term leaching studies conducted by Senthil Kumar and Sureshkumar (2018) showed minimal release of plastic particles from properly constructed plastic-modified pavements.

Air quality improvements can be achieved through reduced open burning of plastic waste and decreased emissions from virgin material production. The controlled processing of plastic waste in road construction eliminates the uncontrolled combustion of plastic waste that often occurs in developing countries. Additionally, the reduced demand for virgin bitumen and aggregates leads to corresponding reductions in emissions from extraction and processing operations. Research by Vasudevan (2018) estimated potential air pollutant reductions of 20-30% when plastic waste is systematically utilized in road construction programs.

The sustainability assessment of plastic waste utilization in road construction must also consider potential negative environmental impacts, including processing emissions, energy requirements, and end-of-life considerations. While the overall environmental balance is generally positive, careful attention must be paid to processing conditions, emission control, and long-term performance to maximize environmental benefits. Table 4 summarizes the environmental impact comparison between conventional and plastic-modified road construction.

Table 4 Environmental Impact Comparison

Impact Category	Conventional Roads	Plastic-Modified Roads	Improvement (%)
CO ₂ Emissions (kg CO ₂ /km)	2,850-3,200	2,280-2,650	15-25
Energy Consumption (GJ/km)	485-540	410-475	10-20
Waste Diversion (tons/km)	0	500-800	N/A
Water Impact (m ³ /km)	1,200-1,400	980-1,180	15-20
Land Use (ha/km)	2.8-3.2	2.3-2.8	15-18

6. Economic Analysis and Cost-Benefit Evaluation

The economic viability of plastic waste utilization in road construction depends on multiple factors including material costs, processing expenses, construction efficiency, and long-term maintenance savings. Initial cost analysis typically shows that plastic-modified road construction requires slightly higher upfront investment due to additional processing requirements and specialized equipment. However, studies by Sangita et al. (2014) demonstrated that the initial cost premium of 5-15% could be offset by reduced material costs when plastic waste is available at low or negative cost from waste management systems.

Material cost savings represent a significant economic advantage, particularly in regions where conventional road construction materials are expensive or scarce. The substitution of a portion of bitumen with plastic waste can result in direct material cost reductions, especially when plastic waste can be obtained from municipal waste streams at minimal cost. Research by Justo and Veeraragavan (2002) calculated potential material cost savings of 8-20% depending on local material prices and plastic waste availability.

Construction efficiency improvements can contribute to overall project cost reductions through reduced construction time and equipment utilization. Plastic-modified mixtures often exhibit better workability and extended workable time, allowing for more efficient paving operations. Studies by Bindu and Beena (2010) reported productivity improvements of 10-25% for plastic-modified pavement construction compared to conventional construction, primarily due to improved mixture handling characteristics and reduced temperature sensitivity.

Long-term maintenance cost savings represent perhaps the most significant economic benefit of plastic waste utilization in road construction. The enhanced performance characteristics of plastic-modified pavements, including improved fatigue resistance, rutting resistance, and durability, translate to extended service life and reduced maintenance frequency. Life cycle cost analysis conducted by Parameswaranpillai et al. (2016) indicated potential maintenance cost savings of 25-40% over a 20-year pavement lifecycle for plastic-modified pavements.

Revenue generation opportunities arise from waste tipping fees, carbon credits, and enhanced pavement performance. Many municipalities are willing to pay tipping fees for plastic waste diversion, creating additional revenue streams for road construction projects. Furthermore, the environmental benefits of plastic waste utilization may qualify projects for carbon credit programs or environmental incentives. Research by Saha et al. (2018) estimated potential revenue generation of \$50-120 per ton of plastic waste diverted, depending on local waste management costs and environmental policies.

The economic feasibility analysis must also consider regional variations in material costs, labor expenses, equipment availability, and regulatory frameworks. Developing countries with abundant plastic waste and limited waste management infrastructure may find plastic waste utilization particularly economically attractive. Conversely, regions with well-established recycling systems and low conventional material costs may face different economic considerations. Table 5 presents a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis framework for plastic waste utilization in road construction.

Table 5 Economic Cost-Benefit Analysis Framework

Cost Component	Conventional Roads (\$/km)	Plastic-Modified Roads (\$/km)	Difference (%)
Initial Material Cost	125,000-175,000	115,000-180,000	-8 to +3
Construction Cost	85,000-120,000	80,000-115,000	-6 to -4
Processing Cost	0	8,000-15,000	N/A
Maintenance (20 years)	95,000-140,000	60,000-105,000	-25 to -40
Total Lifecycle Cost	305,000-435,000	263,000-415,000	-8 to -15
Waste Tipping Revenue	0	-25,000 to -60,000	N/A
Net Economic Benefit	Base	-67,000 to -140,000	15-35

7. Conclusions

The comprehensive review of plastic waste utilization in road construction demonstrates significant potential for addressing both environmental challenges and infrastructure development needs. The technical feasibility of incorporating various plastic waste types into road construction has been well-established through extensive laboratory studies and field demonstrations. Different plastic types, including PET, HDPE, PP, and mixed plastic waste, have shown promising results when properly processed and incorporated into road construction materials. The performance characteristics of plastic-modified roads generally exceed those of conventional pavements, with particular improvements in Marshall stability, tensile strength, rutting resistance, and fatigue life.

Processing techniques have evolved to accommodate different plastic waste types and construction requirements, with both dry and wet process methods proving effective for various applications. The development of standardized processing protocols and quality control measures has been crucial for ensuring consistent performance and facilitating widespread adoption. Temperature control, particle size optimization, and mixing procedures have been identified as key factors influencing the success of plastic waste incorporation in road construction.

Environmental impact assessment reveals substantial benefits from plastic waste utilization in road construction, including reduced greenhouse gas emissions, energy savings, waste diversion from landfills, and prevention of environmental pollution. Life cycle analysis studies consistently demonstrate overall environmental improvements, although careful attention to processing conditions and end-of-life considerations remains important for maximizing environmental benefits.

Economic analysis indicates favorable cost-benefit ratios for plastic waste utilization in road construction, particularly when long-term lifecycle costs are considered. While initial construction costs may be slightly higher, the combination of material cost savings, improved construction efficiency, reduced maintenance requirements, and potential revenue from waste diversion creates attractive economic propositions for many applications.

The successful implementation of plastic waste in road construction requires supportive policy frameworks, technical standards, and industry acceptance. Future research should focus on developing standardized specifications, long-term performance monitoring, and optimization of processing techniques for different regional conditions. The integration of plastic waste utilization into sustainable infrastructure development strategies represents a significant opportunity for advancing both environmental protection and infrastructure resilience.

The widespread adoption of plastic waste in road construction could contribute substantially to global sustainability objectives while providing practical solutions for waste management challenges. Continued research and development efforts, combined with supportive policies and industry collaboration, will be essential for realizing the full potential of this promising technology in creating more sustainable and resilient transportation infrastructure.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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