

Greening our cities Environmental Priorities for Urban Communities

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Stop burning and dumping waste – Start thinking

Almost 20 years ago, the EU announced the aim “to stabilise production of municipal waste... at 300 kg per person per year”.¹

Reality check in 2006: The production of municipal waste is approaching 600 kg per person in the old EU-15.² This is the bad news.

The good news is that recycling of municipal waste has nearly doubled between 1995 and 2003.³

But today only 27% of all municipal waste is recycled.⁴ Most of the rest ends up in landfills or is burnt in incinerators.

The increase in recycling has been offset almost completely by an increase in municipal waste generation. So the absolute quantity of EU waste land-filled or incinerated is not going down.⁵

Millions of tons of quality materials – paper, plastics, metals and biodegradable wastes – are ending up in landfills or incinerators instead of being reused or recycled.

The OECD predicts that by the year 2020, municipal waste generation in the EU will increase by 43% in comparison with 1995.⁶

We are talking here of a rising mountain of waste, with serious environmental, health, social and economic consequences.

Research shows that up to 80% of our garbage can be recycled and composted.⁷

Germany, Austria and Belgium are already recycling and composting more than 50% of their municipal waste, while UK, Irish or Portuguese authorities seem happy with a mediocre 20-30%.⁸

But why aren't all EU member states recycling and composting 80% of their garbage?

Friends of the Earth Europe believes that the reason behind this shameful failure is a lack of political will at all political levels: local, regional, national and EU level.

Let us now have a close look at how the EU Commission plans to tackle the European waste crisis: It published its proposals at the end of 2005 and presented them as a step “towards a recycling society”.⁹

From our point of view, these proposals are in actual fact a step backward because they will create a society that is much less resource-efficient and recycles much less than is technologically possible today.

The first weak point of the Commission’s proposals is that it promotes incineration at the expense of the more resource-efficient waste management methods.

The normal waste hierarchy stipulates that the top priority is waste prevention, followed by reuse and then material recovery. Only after all these possibilities have been exhausted should waste be incinerated to produce energy. Waste disposal – that is land-filling and incineration – is the very last possibility in the current system.

Yet the Commission is proposing to reclassify incineration as waste recovery. This will put burning of waste on the same level as recycling! This is madness.

Incinerators have indeed become cleaner than in the past and can produce energy. Fine. But incineration – just like land-filling - means the loss of natural resources.

For each ton of incinerated or land-filled materials, ten tons of raw materials must then again be logged or extracted and then processed¹⁰ – causing more emissions of carbon dioxide, more energy consumption, more toxic pollution and more devastation of natural biotopes.

More incineration and land-filling also means, in the long-term, less resources for the world’s future generations. In the short-term it means less resources for poorer countries wanting to develop.

Incineration and land-filling means burning and dumping tax-payers’ money – money that can be much better invested in waste prevention and recycling.

We therefore appeal to the European Parliament and EU member states to substantially improve the Commission’s proposal.

Here are some arguments:

- Redefining incineration as recovery will encourage exports of hundreds of thousands of tons of waste from EU-15 to be burnt in incinerators in central and eastern European states. Four central European governments (Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia and Hungary) are for this very reason vocally opposing the Commission’s proposal.¹¹
- The recycling of one ton of municipal waste saves on average 0.8 tons of CO₂-equivalent of greenhouse gases.¹²

- “Waste-to-electricity” incinerators, on the other hand, produce more climate-damaging greenhouse gases than a gas-fired power station.¹³
- Recycling creates many more jobs. Ironically, the Commission’s proposals argue that *“recycling needs 10,000 tonnes of waste needs up to 250 jobs, compared with 20 to 40 jobs needed if the waste is incinerated and about 10 for landfill”*.¹⁴
- If incineration is classified as recovery, then there will be much less of an incentive for industry to innovate towards products that avoid waste or are recyclable.
- This will definitely not be in line with the Commission’s publicised will to promote Europe’s competitiveness and create new jobs. EU Commission President José Manuel Barroso and EU Commissioner for Enterprise and Industry, Günter Verheugen, should be the first ones screaming.
- Investments in expensive and large-scale incinerators oblige towns and regions to provide huge amounts of waste for many years, so that the investment pays off. This blocks efforts to reduce or recycle waste.

Friends of the Earth Europe believes that a number of important changes need to be made to the Commission’s proposal, in particular:

- Incineration must not be reclassified as recovery.
- Incineration and landfilling of all waste that can be reused, recycled or composted must be phased out.
- Effective measures for increased prevention and recycling of waste must be introduced.
- The EU must push manufacturers to make products more durable, more reusable and more recyclable.
- EU member states must maintain the prerogative to reject imports of waste for landfilling and incineration.
- EU structural and cohesion funds must be systematically focused on waste prevention, sorting and recycling.

Conclusion: The Commission’s proposals, as they stand, would perpetuate the unsustainable and inefficient approach to Europe’s waste problem for many years to come.

We do not need such an EU waste policy. We need an EU waste prevention and recycling policy that will maximise our resource efficiency and minimise our impacts on the climate.

We need a policy that would also protect our environment and leave more resources available for the rest of the world and the future generations.

Thank you

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