



EUROPEAN COMMISSION

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Making waste a resource and moving towards a truly circular economy

*Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort*

"Zero Waste Europe" Conference (at the European Parliament)
Brussels, 7 March 2013

Ladies and Gentlemen,

“Zero Waste”... How far are we from it? In fact this week we received the latest data from Eurostat, so I can tell you.

In Europe we generate just over 500 kilos of municipal waste per person each year. If you think that the average weight of a person in Europe is 72 kilos, that means on average we throw away 7 times our own weight.

What happens to that waste? Well if you look at the picture across Europe, 37 % – more than a third – goes to landfills, and only one-quarter is recycled. That doesn't sound too good, but the better news is that we are moving in the right direction. Just 10 years ago more than half of that waste – 56 % – went to landfill, and less than a fifth – 17 % – was recycled. Our rates of composting are also improving, up from 10 % to 15 %.

So Zero waste might be an ambitious goal in our highly industrialised societies; but it is the right aspiration. And the real story of those statistics is told when you look beneath the European averages to what has happened in individual Member States. Four Member States – Germany, Austria, Holland and Belgium – are recycling or composting more than 50 % of their municipal waste, putting those resources back into productive use. But seven Member States are burying more than 80 % of their waste in holes in the ground; three of them bury more than 90 %.

I see this as a tantalising view of what can be achieved; because those best performing Member States were also burying most of their waste a couple of decades ago.

So what is the secret of success? And what more can we do?

We already have the appropriate basic rules in place: European waste legislation clearly focuses on three main elements:

- The **waste hierarchy** sets the agenda for **resource efficiency** with waste prevention as the highest priority, followed by preparation for re-use and recycling. Landfill is the very last resort.
- Member States have to draw up **waste prevention plans** by the end of this year, and
- Member States are encouraged to take measures to ensure **extended producer responsibility** with a clear view to prevent or minimise waste.

Let me start with the last point: Extended producer responsibility means:

- The producer accepts returned products at the end of their life;
- information is provided to consumers on the extent to which the product is re-usable and recyclable;
- better design of products is encouraged to reduce their environmental impact by making them more durable, repairable and reusable, and to make them more suitable for proper and safe recovery when they become waste.

The European Commission has given a clear signal of what we should be aiming for. In our Roadmap on Resource Efficiency – and in the 7th Environmental Action Plan now under discussion in the Parliament and Council – we propose to **phase out landfilling by 2020** and to **limit energy recovery** to residual waste – that means only those materials that cannot be re-used or recycled.

That brings me to a key issue. Can energy recovery be a valid and justified part of a waste management strategy?

Some Member States have achieved significant reductions in their landfilling rates by building incinerators. 8 of them burn more than a third of municipal waste; for five of these it has helped them achieve landfilling rates of less than 3 %.

But energy recovery remains far from the top of the waste hierarchy. That is why we are clear that we must continue to work towards burning only that waste which cannot be re-used or recycled. Incineration can be one element of a waste management strategy, but it is not optimal, particularly in the medium term. Member States seeking to move from the bottom of the waste hierarchy should be careful not to create over-capacity in incineration by investing heavily in such infrastructure without creating the conditions for waste reduction, recycling and composting. We need to take a longer term view, which means that we should design products to last and to be recyclable. In that way we can ensure that fewer of them are incinerated.

Ladies and gentlemen,

A particular development in our waste over the last decades has been the increasing proportion of plastic waste. Plastic poses particular challenges, and perhaps our first step towards "zero waste" should be "zero plastic waste" released to the environment.

The Commission is tackling the issue openly, and today we have published a Green Paper on "**a European Strategy on plastic waste in the Environment**".

The Green Paper deals specifically with plastic waste as a **single horizontal waste stream**. The paper has nevertheless significance beyond that single waste stream, as it exemplifies how waste, as a resource, must be part of the resource efficiency and resource conservation story. The fundamental issue around which the paper asks 26 specific questions is "how could we do more with less".

We are still generating increasing quantities of plastic waste. We have to deal with the waste itself, but also the plastic that escapes from waste streams – better known as litter. Litter is not only unattractive to see; we are now witnessing the consequence of the presence of microplastic in the marine environment. This is a matter of very serious concern.

As the next step, we will launch a broad public consultation. We need to have the views of all stakeholders, including industry, consumers, and public administrations.

For **Producers**, plastic is an attractive material because it is so adaptable and has almost countless applications. It is clear that **we cannot count on a plastic-free future, so** our aim must be to find intelligent solutions to **limit plastic waste** as much as possible.

The challenges for industry are:

- To design plastic and plastic products that can be repaired, re-used or recycled. Some of the changes are so simple: like avoiding black colouring which turns an unattractive shade of grey when recycled.
- To avoid all toxic material in plastic. Endocrine disruptors and heavy metals should not be found in any plastic.
- To properly reflect the costs of plastic production in the product price and take responsibility for collection of used plastic goods to ensure recycling or environmentally safe disposal. Producers should also inform consumers about the potential risks stemming from plastic if not properly managed.
- And more importantly, industry should make more sustainable use of plastic, and reduce production of items like single-use plastic carrier bags or plastic gadgets that are thrown away immediately after purchase.

Consumers also have a decisive role to play since their demand determines the design and availability of the products.

Consumers increasingly want to make better informed choices when buying, taking into account aspects such as durability and reparability. Do children's toys systematically have to be made of plastic? Should we as consumers not refuse cheap plastic gadgets just produced for marketing purposes?

We also need to promote greater public awareness that plastic is not inert and that it can be a potential danger for the environment when not properly disposed of. We all have to accept our responsibility to collect and take back.

Public administrations also have responsibilities:

- They should ensure a 100 % collection rate for plastic waste; provide collection points close to citizens and set up technical infrastructure for waste management.
- They should close all channels for illegal landfilling.
- They should help create conditions for recycling to be a profitable business. Diverting all plastics from landfills is already an important element.
- They should systematically apply public procurement to increase the demand for products made from recycling material.

To achieve all this, we need dedicated co-operation from all players. I know that the plastics industry is not indifferent to environmental concerns and that they too would like to find a solution to sustainable plastic waste management. I see the plastic industry as important partners.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Waste is often seen as such a big problem. But we have to start to see it as such a big opportunity. We have started to move in the right direction using European legislation, but it is my firm belief that it is the economic rationale for treating our waste as a resource which will be the real driver leading us towards zero waste. We already estimate that just implementing existing waste legislation properly would create 400,000 jobs in the EU. But the potential of moving towards a truly circular economy – where materials are used again and again instead of going on a one-way trip – is truly phenomenal.