

Parliament votes in favour of waste recycling over incineration

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MEPs agreed on setting binding targets for waste reduction and the introduction of a five-step hierarchy that gives priority to prevention, reuse and recycling over landfills.

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Background:

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MEPs were voting on two 2005 Commission initiatives to replace the existing 1975 waste framework, with the intention of placing more emphasis on prevention and recycling. The first, the EU waste directive, aims to set binding targets for waste for the first time, while the second, the Thematic Strategy on the Prevention and Recycling of Waste, focuses on the long-term EU waste strategy.

Waste is a growing problem for the EU, which produces more than 500kg of waste per person per year, a figure that outstrips GDP growth. Official statistics show that of the 3.5 billion tonnes of waste produced by the EU each year, less than a third of the municipal waste is recycled and almost half goes to landfill sites.

Issues:

In a vote on 13 February, the European Parliament gave an overwhelming backing to proposed waste legislation supported by its Environment Committee in November last year ([EurActiv 29/11/06](#)). The main provisions of the reports include:

- The introduction of a five-step waste 'hierarchy' that gives priority to prevention, reuse and recycling over landfills;

- EU waste-prevention targets to stabilise waste production by 2012 to the level produced in 2008, and for waste production to start declining from 2020, and;
- a rejection of the Commission's proposal to reclassify incineration from "disposal" to "recovery" for energy production.

The Parliament also introduced targets for reuse and recycling. By 2020, 50% of municipal solid waste and 70% of waste from construction, demolition, industry and manufacturing must be re-used or recycled. In principle any waste must, wherever possible, at least be recovered.

At present, large differences exist among member states' recycling rates. While some recycle up to 65% of waste, others recycle only 10% and send the rest to landfill.

The Commission's original proposal had called for a three-step hierarchical system that did not prioritise between reuse, recycling and recovery. Packaging groups favoured this option as it was seen to be more flexible and avoid potentially costly impact studies justifying one form of packaging over another.

However, MEPs have voted in favour of the five-step hierarchy, which lays down the order of preference for waste options, while giving manufacturers the option to submit lifecycle assessment reports and cost-to-benefit analyses if an alternative treatment option is better. Rapporteur Caroline Jackson had expressed concerns that: "For a country such as Ireland, which came to this late, there are worries that they could move straight to incineration, without doing anything to promote recycling, with the three-stage hierarchy."

Finally, the Commission was also called upon to propose a Directive on Biowaste by 2008.

Positions:

British Conservative Rapporteur Caroline Jackson hailed the vote as a "victory for those who believe that energy from waste has a part to play in dealing with the waste we must divert from landfill in future".

Jill Evans of the Green/EFA Group, welcoming the decision not to rebrand incineration, said: "Rebranding incineration as a means of recovery rather than waste disposal could create the impression that burning our rubbish is environmentally friendly, which it clearly is not." She believes that: "Reduction, reuse and recycling must be the priorities guiding our approach to waste."

Environmental advocacy groups **Health Care Without Harm (HCWH)** and the **Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA)** were "particularly pleased" with the decision not to rebrand incineration. **Cestmir Hrdinka, Executive Director of HCWH** said: "By treating all incinerators as disposal operations, the legislation cuts off the possibility of Central and Eastern European countries becoming waste disposal units for the rest of Europe."

Chris Davies of the ALDE group called on MEPs to lead the way in setting an example: "We need to curb the growth in waste and then take steps to reduce it. MEPs could take steps to reduce the amount of waste they produce...the European Parliament still generates vast quantities of paper with 99% destined for the waste bin. We are grossly extravagant in our use of natural resources and we are failing to practice what we preach."

Dr Michael Warhurst, Waste and Resources Campaigner for Friends of the Earth Europe, said that the MEPs support "for clear legislation supporting prevention, reuse and recycling, and their insistence on a biowaste Directive, will make a real difference in creating a sustainable Europe".

Guido Lena, UEAPME director for Environmental Affairs, expressed a fear that the legislation will impose unnecessary bureaucratic restrictions on SMEs: "Small businesses will suffer from increased red tape and disproportionate requirements introduced by the Waste Directive in its current wording. We trust that the member states and the Commission will work to improve the text and find workable solutions for SMEs," she said.

A group of **ten European industry organisations** sent a letter to the Parliament before the vote, expressing concern that the five-step waste hierarchy would be too rigid: "The hierarchy must be applied in a pragmatic and flexible way since each local situation and each product and waste stream can be different. Requiring additional and costly analysis on top of those required for the waste management plans is not helpful and will not result in more efficient and effective waste management," said a coalition spokesperson.

The **Confederation of European Waste-to-Energy (WtE) plants** welcomed the MEPs' decision to recognise WtE as energy recovery and said that the ambitious recycling targets "will enable recycling and WtE to work hand in hand to divert waste from landfill and to achieve sustainable waste management".

Latest & next steps:

- **26 June 2007:** Political agreement expected in Council.