

# Spitting In The Wind?

**Kathryn Sheridan** of Sustainability Consult reports from Brussels on the latest political and environmental issues, starting with the question: is EU waste policy just spitting in the wind?

**T**he waste sector has not been spared the effects of the economic downturn and those suffering the most are the ones who jumped on the bandwagon when the price of recycled materials was at its highest. A bit like homeowners who expect prices to keep going up and never fall, these businesses were counting on prices staying high. The economic slump has caused a decline in the worldwide demand for construction and manufacturing, affecting all materials but leaving recyclates the hardest hit. Then, to add to their troubles, the banks – the same ones who previously handed out five

times salary mortgages to individuals – are reining in their financial support!

Plastic and paper are the most affected by this, according to a paper prepared by the European Commission for the Czech Presidency of the EU and presented at the March Environment Council. The concern is not purely economic, but there is now a global surplus of waste collected for recycling, which is either being stored in the hope of a price rise or disposed of through incineration or landfill. From the European citizen's perspective, there must surely be some frustration that their hand-sorted household recycling

is not, in fact, being recycled but disposed of with ordinary household waste [CIWM has no evidence that materials collected for recycling in the UK are being stored in large quantities or disposed of to either landfill or incineration – The Editor].

Waste management companies seem to have lobbied successfully as the report presented by the Council gives the facts and figures to show the economic size and importance of the industry, as well as its contribution to European competitiveness, which was certainly last year's highest scorer on the Brussels buzzword bingo card and, given the climate today, may



Picture courtesy of the Scottish Environment Protection Agency (SEPA)

well continue to be. Fortunately, the Environment Council does not only think about the economy; recycling's strategic environmental importance and the contribution to material efficiency and energy saving were also mentioned. According to the paper, an estimated 200m tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent is saved by recycling metals, glass, paper and plastics.

The Council conclusions state that a large number of member states are concerned by the decline in demand for recycled materials and "noted the need for short and long-term measures" to address the situation. But what can be done to boost recycling in Europe and to create a market for recycled products? Landfill bans and bin taxes encourage the separation and recycling of waste, but are certainly not widespread across Europe. The Council's paper sets out a number of areas, including reducing the administrative burden in certain areas, as well as a future revision of the IPPC Directive. Existing legislation, such as that on eco-design with its "recyclability criteria", energy-using products and the Waste Framework Directive, should all be used to support waste reduction... but more needs to be done.

## Green Procurement

GREEN PUBLIC procurement is seen as a way to create a market in the longer-term and the procurement of recycled materials by businesses should be "encouraged". VAT and other tax instruments to encourage more environmentally-sound behaviour were floated but any concrete initiative on this would have to come from EU finance ministers. As the bottom has fallen out of the market for recycling poorly-sorted and contaminated waste, the EU suggests improving collection and sorting at a national level.

The Council believes existing recycling targets should be kept, for the sake of public confidence, and is even considering making a public statement to try to boost recycling. As far as public support of government in a recession goes, asking the public to support a particular activity could end up being counterproductive.

A report released in early March

from the EU's statistics office, Eurostat, reported that 39 percent of municipal waste in the EU is recycled or composted. Of the remaining waste, 42 percent is landfilled and 20 percent incinerated, but the geographic breakdown of this information makes for interesting reading. Contrary to what might be expected, Denmark generates the most municipal waste in the EU with 801kg per person, with the lowest being the Czech Republic at 294kg per person. Although some member states' definitions of municipal waste differ, this is still a considerable difference.

New member states still favour landfilling for the vast majority of their waste, whereas composting is a hit in Austria, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands, with around 60 percent of waste composted. The most waste is recycled in Germany with 46 percent, Belgium 39 percent, Sweden 37 percent and Estonia and Ireland, both at 34 percent. Incineration is still popular, with 53 percent of waste being incinerated in Denmark, 47 percent in Luxembourg and Sweden, 38 percent in the Netherlands... and so it goes on.

This is the first time Eurostat has published data on recycling and composting that shows the EU is starting to take waste reduction seriously, or at least the data collection element.

## Hitting The Headlines

EXPORTS OF waste, both legal and illegal, also made the headlines in March with the publication of a new report from the European Environment Agency (EEA). *Waste Without Borders In The EU* looks at the increase of cross-border waste shipments and examines the growing problem of illegal exports. However, it starts out with the disclaimer that the perceived increase in illegal shipments may just be due to better monitoring. It goes on to say that the data is not adequate to ascertain whether the treatment in the country receiving the waste is more environmentally-friendly or more cost-effective. So what does this report tell us?

Legitimate shipments of hazardous and problematic waste have

increased significantly, with the majority remaining within the EU's borders. Waste tax plays a part here as countries with low (or even no) tariffs in place, according to the report, "might" receive waste from high waste tax areas. The EEA stops to give the EU a pat on the back, saying that the political ambition of being self-sufficient for landfill and other waste disposal activities has "almost been achieved", but achieved across the whole EU area and not in individual member states, as set out in the Waste Framework Directive. Some shipping of waste within the EU is justified, says the Agency, as treatment facilities in the older member states are more sophisticated and give better environmental protection than those in the new.

Illegal shipments of waste are also on the increase and, while sending e-waste outside the EU's borders is illegal, NGOs report that it is going on and it is leading to severe environment and health problems. The EEA says analysis of trade statistics backs this up and it mentions the difficulty of waste being declared as second-hand goods on shipping declarations, calling for more stringent reporting on the exports of e-waste [more of which in next month's *CIWM*]. The problem of the illegal dumping of hazardous waste was highlighted by pirates in Somalia, who hit the headlines earlier this year claiming their ransom demands for hijacked ships were a means of "reacting to the toxic waste that has been continually dumped on the shores of our country for nearly 20 years". This claim was supported by the UN envoy for Somalia who told Al Jazeera that there was "reliable information" that European and Asian companies are routinely dumping toxic and nuclear waste off the coast of Somalia. The increase in both legal and illegal waste traffic shows the importance of producer responsibility throughout the whole lifecycle and the need to create a self-supported market for both recycling and recycled products at home. **CIWM**

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