

It Doesn't Grow On Trees

EU waste production is steady and recycling and composting are on the up, but we still need to fully assess the development of our energy efficient products, which don't grow on trees, as Kathryn Sheridan reports



Denmark produces more waste per person than any other country in the European Union, with a hefty 833kg of municipal waste, compared to the Czech Republic or Poland which has only 316kg per person. And yet, only four percent of Denmark's waste is landfilled, which is good news for the recycling and composting industry.

The latest waste statistics from the EU's statistics office, Eurostat, paint a very mixed picture of 2009 waste output in the EU. The report shows a very slight decrease in the EU average of waste generated – at 513kg per person, which puts the UK right around the average with 529kg generated.

However, as with much pan-European monitoring, this is not a perfect science. Some countries have estimated some of the figures and, in others, waste from offices, small businesses and government offices is also included. Certainly, in Belgium where we run a small business, our waste is taken out with the household rubbish.

The lowest rates came from the newer EU member countries, but that is to be expected. As the standard of living increases to Western European standards, the waste output will rise with it, unless proper infrastructure for recycling and composting is put in place.

Overall, recycling or composting increased in 2009 to 42 percent,

compared to 39 percent in 2008. There is still a mixed reception for composting, with Austria leading the way and composting 40 percent of its waste. Unusually for the southern European countries, Italy composts 32 percent of its waste with its Benelux neighbours, the Netherlands (28 percent) and Belgium (24 percent) close behind. Overall, the EU composted 90kg per person in 2009, compared to less than half that figure (44kg) in 1999.

The Scandinavian environmental champions seem to favour recycling over composting, with Sweden recycling 26 percent and Denmark 32 percent, but recycling success is not limited to the frozen north. Germany recycles a mighty 48 percent, Belgium

36 percent, Slovenia 34 percent and Ireland and the Netherlands 32 percent. The UK is not doing too badly, recycling 26 percent and composting 14 percent. In seven EU countries, however, less than 10 percent of waste was recycled or composted.

Incineration is another mixed bag, with 10 out of 27 EU countries treating one percent or less through incineration, but some of the bigger waste producers are still relying on this method to deal with much of their waste. These are Sweden (49 percent of waste treated), Denmark (48 percent), the Netherlands (39 percent), Luxembourg (36 percent), Belgium (35 percent), Germany and France (34 percent each).

Use of the environmentalists' dreaded landfill fell only slightly from 2008 to 2009. Bulgaria landfills all of its waste with Romania, Malta, Lithuania and Latvia landfilling between 92 and 99 percent. Will this finger-pointing exercise have them running off in shame to build recycling facilities and introduce collection schemes? Probably not... it often seems not to work that way.

Landfill's Falling

SINCE 2000 landfilling across the 27 EU countries has been falling year on year, but looking at the figures country by country, no single EU member has seen a significant decline in landfilling between 2008 and 2009.

Earlier this year the European Commission reported on the EU countries' performance in the prevention and recycling of waste. The Commission concluded that while we are on the way to a "recycling society", much still needs to be done. The mindset change needed to begin seeing waste as a resource is a long way off and, coupled with the shortage of rare earth elements and the valuable resources contained in electronic waste, the Commission is serious about its goal for a resource-efficient economy in Europe. European Environment Commissioner, Janez Potocnik, said the recycling economy would create half a million jobs in the waste recycling sector.

According to the report, which

came out a couple of months before the Eurostat figures reported here previously, waste generation seems to be increasing or, at best, stabilising but at a lower rate than economic growth. "More could be done, therefore, to reduce the absolute generation of waste", the Commission's press release said, citing food waste as an example. It says 25 percent of food bought by EU households is thrown away and that 60 percent of this food waste

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could be avoided, which would save each household around 500 per year.

The EU wants countries to use a combination of economic and legal instruments to encourage the shift to a recycling-focused economy, including landfill bans and applying producer responsibility. Linking product design and waste policies is needed to further boost recycling, as well as involving the public more and improving stakeholder participation.

Enforcement of legislation also gets a mention as waste issues represent about 20 percent of all environmental infringement cases. The January report commented on the delay of many countries in transposing the new Waste Framework Directive, which should have been transposed into national law by 12 December 2010. This could lead to a new round of infringement proceedings against those laggards that have still not implemented it.

The new Waste Framework Directive aims to simplify the EU's approach to waste policy and to instill the concept of "lifecycle thinking". With its binding waste hierarchy defining the order of priority for treating waste, from waste prevention followed by re-use, recycling and other recovery operations, with disposal such as landfill used only as the last resort, the Directive forces countries to clean up their act... and quickly.

Waste prevention programmes must be in place by 2013 and the goal is for 50 percent of municipal waste and 70 percent of construction and demolition waste to be recycled by 2020.

Gathering Views

RESOURCES AND resource efficiency are still very much on the political agenda in Brussels. The European Commission launched an online consultation at the end of February on policy options to encourage a switch to more efficient use of natural resources. The results will feed into a "roadmap" for a resource efficient Europe, expected in Summer 2011.

Interested parties have until mid-April to submit comments.

But I feel that we need a reality check concerning energy efficient technology in order to accelerate its use. If we go on thinking that because something saves energy, it must be made out of bunny rabbits' tails, we will continue to confuse consumers.

Energy efficient technology is essential if we are to reduce emissions and our dependence on fossil fuels. This is where the reality check needs to come in. What policy-makers and some stakeholders seem to overlook is that every low-energy lightbulb, hybrid engine or solar panel is made from materials, some of which will be classed as hazardous substances. Concerns were raised in the media recently about LED lights containing lead, arsenic, nickel and other hazardous substances. LEDs are set to become a major energy saver and the market for them doubled in 2010, according to LEDs magazine.

Rather than creating panic campaigns in the media and hitting consumers with mixed messages, we need to have a balanced debate about the safe collection and recycling of energy efficient technologies... and the waste management industry needs to be at the table for those discussions. [CIWM](#)

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