

# Thematic Strategy on the recycling of waste

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**PURPOSE :** Commission Communication presenting a Thematic Strategy on the prevention and recycling of waste.

**CONTENT :** this Communication analyses and assesses EU waste policy, with a view to setting the strategic framework for the future. As prescribed in the Sixth Environment Action Programme, the Thematic Strategy sets objectives so that the EU may move towards improved waste management.

The paper begins by describing the existing situation, and states that while recycling and incineration are increasing, the absolute amounts of waste land filled are not decreasing because of the growth in waste generation. These unsustainable trends are due in part to unsatisfactory implementation of waste laws which, in turn, is due in part to certain elements of the policy and legal framework that could be improved. EU waste policy has the potential to contribute to reducing the overall negative environmental impact of resource use. Preventing waste generation and promoting recycling and recovery of waste will increase the resource efficiency of the European economy and reduce the negative environmental impact of use of natural resources. This will contribute to maintaining the resource base, essential for sustained economic growth. The basic objectives of current EU waste policy – to prevent waste and promote re-use, recycling and recovery so as to reduce the negative environmental impact – are still valid and will be supported by this impact-based approach. The long-term goal is for the EU to become a recycling society. With high environmental reference standards in place the internal market will facilitate recycling and recovery activities.

**Action:** the proposal is to modernise the existing legal framework – i.e. to introduce lifecycle analysis in policymaking and to clarify, simplify and streamline EU waste law. This requires a combination of measures promoting waste prevention, recycling and re-use in such a way as to produce the optimum reduction in the accumulated impact over the life cycle of resources, including:

**A renewed emphasis on full implementation of existing legislation.** Part of this strategy is designed to remove ambiguities, resolve disputed interpretations and amend legislation which has not brought the expected environmental benefits. The Commission will continue to take legal action to ensure equal enforcement of the *acquis* across all Member States.

**Simplification and modernisation of existing legislation.** Several actions are proposed under this heading. In addition, and beyond the proposals adopted together with this Strategy, in the context of a continuous and systematic review of EU waste legislation, the Commission will assess the need for additional steps taking the better regulation and simplification objectives further.

**Introduction of life-cycle thinking into waste policy.** Environmental policy traditionally focused on the early and the final phases of the life cycle: extraction, processing and manufacturing at one end and waste management at the other. It is now recognised that the environmental impact of many resources is often linked to the use phase. All phases in a resource's life cycle need to be taken into account as there can be trade-offs between different phases and measures adopted to reduce environmental impact in one phase can increase the impact in another. Clearly, environmental policy needs to ensure that negative environmental impact is minimised throughout the entire life cycle of resources. By applying the life-cycle approach, priorities can be identified more easily and policies can be targeted more effectively.

The life-cycle approach will be incorporated in EU legislation by clarifying the objectives of the Waste Framework Directive so that they explicitly consider the life-cycle perspective. The recent review of

recycling and recovery targets for packaging waste materials was the first example of using life-cycle thinking for policymaking. New targets are set for each material concerned by analysing the environmental and economic impact throughout the life cycle of the material. The review of the management of waste oil is another area in which life-cycle thinking was applied.

**Promotion of more ambitious waste prevention policies** by clarifying Member States' obligations to develop publicly available waste prevention programmes. At EU level the Commission will promote the use of the IPPC Directive, IPP and other tools to encourage the spread of best practice.

**Better knowledge and information** which will underpin the continued development of waste prevention policy.

**Development of common reference standards for recycling.** The proposal is to set minimum standards across the Community for recycling activities and recycled materials so as to ensure a high level of environmental protection and to prevent the threat of "eco-dumping".

**Further elaboration of the EU's recycling policy.** Building on the implementation of existing EU waste legislation, new ways to foster recycling will be sought. A detailed analysis of the long-term feasibility and viability of a material-specific approach will be undertaken. Member States will also be encouraged to make more use of economic instruments and to exchange experience/best practice through improved coordination in the Waste Management Committee.

**Impact of the proposed changes.** The Thematic Strategy is expected to have implications for current practices in the Member States and to create new opportunities for waste management options other than landfill:

**Less waste to landfill.** The stronger focus on implementation and on the promotion of economic instruments will help to bring landfill prices up to a level which better reflects the real environmental impact of this waste management option, with the result that less waste should go to landfill.

**More compost and energy recovery from waste.** As waste moves away from landfill it will be channelled into a variety of options higher up the waste hierarchy. The development of quality benchmarks for composting facilities and for compost will increase the prospects for composting.

Where energy is recovered from waste the Strategy will increase energy efficiency.

**More and better recycling.** The next five years will be a key period in terms of implementation of the Recycling Directives. By setting minimum quality standards for some recycling facilities, a significant

improvement is expected, moving from the current situation where only 8 to 10% of wastes are covered by minimum quality standards to a situation where a substantial part of waste for recycling is covered.

**Key benefits and positive impacts:** these can be illustrated by the following quantified examples:

- further diversion of municipal waste from landfill to composting, recycling and energy recovery could produce additional reductions in greenhouse gas emissions ranging from 40 to over 100 Mt CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent per year;
- clarifying when wastes cease to be waste could reduce part of the administrative costs related to waste legislation. For example, the aggregates recycling sector estimates these costs at roughly 1% of turnover;

- increased recycling creates jobs: recycling 10 000 tonnes of waste need up to 250 jobs compared with 20 to 40 jobs needed if the waste is incinerated and about 10 for landfill. Taking into account reduced job creation in the extraction and production of virgin materials this should result in a limited net creation of jobs.

**For further information concerning the financial implications of this measure, please refer to the financial statement.**