EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT VOTES ON WASTE FRAMEWORK DIRECTIVE

Are the new European waste targets and measurement methodology realistic?
In mid-March the European Parliament will vote on the new Waste Framework Directive. The main points of contention are whether the proposed target for recycling 70% of municipal waste by 2030 and the new calculation methodology for recycling are realistic or not. Waste associations in the Netherlands, Germany and Denmark are critical.

The European Parliament will debate the Waste Framework Directive in its plenary session in mid-March, when it will make several key decisions regarding the future of waste recycling and reuse. It will then negotiate these with the member states. There are two key issues in the review of the Waste Framework Directive: the higher recycling target for municipal waste and the new calculation methodology. The European Parliament is ambitious and wants to raise the target proposed by the European Commission – recycling 60% of municipal waste by 2025 and 65% by 2030 – to 70% by 2030.

New measurement methodology
Besides raising the recycling rate, the European Commission wants to establish a new calculation methodology. The Commission wants to shift the point of measurement further down the waste recycling chain. At the moment, many member states base their calculations on the amount of separately collected waste; what happens to the waste after that is not reflected in the statistics. All the raw materials lost during sorting, cleaning and recycling are not included in the calculation of the recycling percentage. ‘The European Parliament wants to move the point of measurement even further down the recycling chain than the European Commission,’ says ROBERT CORIJN, the commercial and marketing manager of Attero waste management company. ‘This would have major consequences, because it makes it more difficult to trace the waste streams back to their sources.’

At a later stage it is no longer possible to determine how much of the granulate is made from municipal waste.

Many member states still base their recycling rates on the amounts of separately collected waste.
The European Parliament wants a target for recycling 70% of municipal waste by 2030, 5% more than the proposal by the European Commission.

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NANA WINKLER (DANSK AFFALDSFORENING)

much more ambitious. It is a risky business to change the calculation method and target at the same time, as we do not know the consequences of the new proposal.’

Practical problems
Is a later point of measurement a feasible option? Corijn foresees a large number of practical problems. ‘Let’s say you have collected and sorted plastic waste and delivered this waste to a recycling facility. According to the European Parliament’s new plans, the recycler would have to weigh the amount of plastic waste arriving at its facility. But the recycling company then processes this plastic waste, which involves the loss of some of the material. So, if you want a figure that truly reflects the actual amount of recycled plastic, you’ll have to shift the point of measurement even further down the recycling chain. However, it is questionable whether recycling companies will be willing to give inspectors a free rein to check all the details of their processes. After all, they will have company secrets to protect, such as the technologies they use to produce the plastic granules. It is also questionable whether the competent authorities have the capacity to carry out these inspections.’

Complicating factor
According to Corijn a further problem is that the granulate consists not only of municipal waste,
It is dangerous to talk about recycling targets without tying them to the issue of quality.

CARSTEN SPOHN (ITAD)
Greater clarity needed first

Another proposal by the European Parliament is to raise the target for recycling municipal waste to 70% by 2030. This recently adopted position goes further than the European Commission’s proposal of a 65% recycling rate in 2030. ‘I think the target is too high,’ says Winkler. The current municipal waste recycling rate for Denmark based on collected amounts is 46%. The association does not yet know what the new calculation methodology will mean for the recycling figures, because the necessary data are not available. ‘We do not really want to discuss the target before it is clear what types of waste are involved and how the target should be calculated.

At the moment, we do not have enough data on the amount of waste entering the final recycling process. For one thing, we do not know how much waste is lost during the stages leading up to the final treatment. It is a sort of black box.’ According to Winkler, this also applies to other EU member states with insufficient data on these processes. Most countries measure the amount of waste collected. She claims that the amount of municipal waste that eventually enters the recycling process is not accurately measured by any country, and that figures are often based on assumptions. In the Netherlands, too, almost all separately collected waste streams are reported as recycling. On this basis, the municipal waste recycling rate in the Netherlands is 51%.

Quality is key

This lack of data is one of the criticisms levelled by Carsten Spohn, director of ITAD, the German association of waste-to-energy plants. He says the quality of the waste is obviously an important aspect. ‘To be honest, just trying to raise the municipal waste recycling rate is the wrong way to go,’ says Spohn. ‘It is dangerous to talk about recycling targets without tying them to the issue of quality. We know that not all waste materials can be recycled into high quality products, and everyone wants to prevent non-recyclable materials putting the quality of recycled materials at risk.’

As long as there are no common quality standards, there is no point in setting recycling targets.
Under the **proposed calculation methodology**, Germany’s *municipal waste recycling rate* is not 64%, but *less than 50%.*

According to Spohn, at the moment a large amount of waste cannot be recycled, for example because it contains contaminated materials. As long as there are no clear and common quality standards, there is no point in setting recycling targets. High quality standards will also create more demand by industry to substitute virgin materials, he says.

**Doubts about recycling rates**

Spohn has doubts about the current recycling percentages reported by member states, which he says are probably largely inaccurate. ‘For relatively simple materials like glass and paper you can achieve recycling rates of 80% to 90%, but it is well known that for materials such as plastics you cannot get much better than about 40%,’ he explains. According to official statistics, in 2013 Germany recycled 64% of its municipal waste. But the European Parliament’s proposed calculation method gives a recycling rate of less than 50%. ‘Achieving a general recycling rate of 70% would be a considerable challenge, even if it does only apply from 2030. We are concerned about this. Such an ambitious target could encourage the use of inefficient processing systems rather than acting as an incentive to work on ecodesign and stimulate the recycling market.’