



The Netherlands' lead in high-grade processing gives it a competitive edge and the port of Rotterdam is an easy entry point for British waste (photo: iStockphoto)

HIGH-GRADE WASTE PROCESSORS SEEK FOREIGN WASTE

Netherlands imports more waste

Importing waste is attractive. The Netherlands' lead in high-grade processing gives it a competitive edge over its neighbours and Dutch waste companies know how to capitalise on this advantage. Imports are rising, despite some obstacles, such as the strict Belgian interpretation of the self-sufficiency principle.

BY PIETER VAN DEN BRAND

The signposts at the border are going to change for good. With its considerable expertise in recycling waste streams, the Netherlands is promoting itself as a materials roundabout. Moreover, most Dutch waste-to-energy plants now have recovery (R1) status. Facilities that meet the European standards for high thermal efficiency are permitted to import combustible waste for treatment. According to statistics provided by NL Agency, more waste will be imported this year, especially from Germany and the UK in particular. Over the first five months of this year imports amounted to about 20,000 tonnes per month. This is 240,000 tonnes on an annual basis, compared with 144,000 tonnes in 2010. In May alone, import permits were issued for almost 500,000 tonnes of waste, bringing the total for this year to almost a million tonnes.

Importing waste is attractive, confirms *Patrick Deprez*, who is responsible for managing waste streams within Van Gansewinkel Group. His company has contracts with almost every waste-to-energy plant in the Netherlands. 'Our priority is to deliver the contracted amounts of waste. In addition, we acquire waste on the spot market to fill the remaining capacities at the waste-to-energy plants.' Deprez notes that the high levels of energy production and optimal heat recovery at Dutch waste-to-energy plants give the Netherlands an advantage over its neighbours. 'This combination is set to become the benchmark for the European waste incineration market. R1 status will no longer be a barrier to entry.' For various reasons, most of the imported waste comes from the UK. 'Although British tariffs are low,' says Deprez, 'the country has insufficient capacity for incineration with energy recovery. The EU has imposed landfill bans and the UK government is raising landfill taxes. Our competitive position is only getting better.' Some waste is even imported from as far away as Italy. Most people's impression of Italy's waste disposal problems is dominated by the images of rubbish clogging the streets of Naples. However, as Deprez explains, 'most of the waste imported from Italy comes from the north of the country, where many regions face a shortage of treatment capacity.'

HESTER KLEIN LANKHORST
(INFRASTRUCTUUR EN MILIEU):
'Ik vind import een
goede ontwikkeling.'

OBSTACLES

Contracting foreign waste is not always a straightforward business. Exports can be blocked under the 'self-sufficiency principle' enshrined in both the Waste Framework Directive and the R1 guidance document. EU countries can appeal to this principle to retain their household waste for treatment in their own waste processing facilities. Commercial waste falls under a free international market regime. International rules for transporting waste in the Waste Shipment Regulation also make it possible for national authorities to resist exports of household waste. Attero has experienced this to its cost when trying to import waste from Flanders. The company wanted to import a shipment of high caloric commercial waste from Belgium to its waste-to-energy plant in Moerdijk, but did not get a green light from the Flemish public waste agency (OVAM). 'They stated that the shipment might have contained waste from private individuals, which meant it would then be classified partly as household waste. In doing so, OVAM turned the burden of proof on its head: it was impossible to make a firm case that the shipment contained only industrial waste,' says *Dick Spanjaard*,

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responsible for regulatory affairs at Attero. OVAM spokesperson *Jan Verheyen* explained the Flemish waste authority's position as follows. 'For household waste or similar commercial waste we do indeed apply the self-sufficiency principle. This waste is not intended for export. European legislation allows plenty of room for interpretation and we choose to interpret the rules strictly.' Verheyen dismisses the accusation that Flanders is obstructing the working of the free market and a level playing field. 'Our aim is not to protect our own facilities, but to protect the environment. Our recycling percentage is among the highest in Europe, and we want to keep it that way. For many years now our incineration capacity has matched demand to within 20 to 30 thousand tonnes at most.'

Deprez says the Flemish recycling ambitions are a model of good environmental policy. 'But it is deplorable if it leads to pure protectionism. I would go so far as to say that there is a slight undercapacity in Belgium, including Flanders. There is a real risk that the combustible waste will have to be landfilled, which undermines their own environmental ambitions.' Deprez suspects that OVAM fears the spot market pricing mechanism will make sorting waste unattractive. 'This fear is unfounded. The vast bulk of waste will not be affected. The separation of metals, paper, plastics and wood will never be in danger.'

LAUDABLE

Hester Klein Lankhorst, head of the waste and material chains department at the Ministry of Infrastructure and the Environment, is delighted by the waste imports. 'It is a laudable development. It is much better for Dutch companies to incinerate waste with energy recovery than for it to end up in a landfill elsewhere in »



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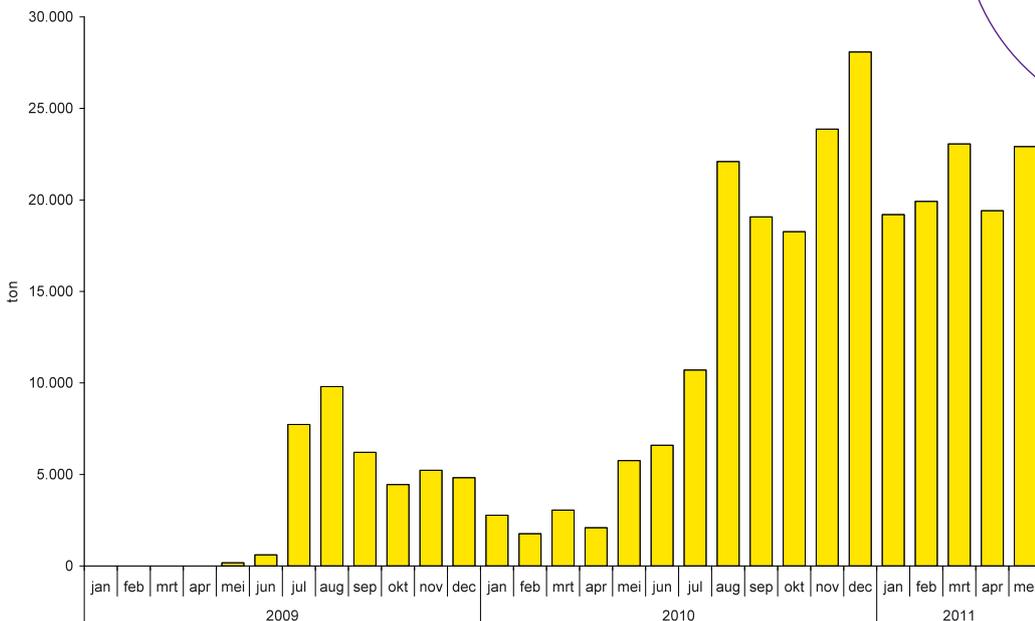
Europe. It is consistent with the philosophy of treating waste as a source of materials and energy. I repeatedly remind my British colleagues of the possibilities for exporting waste to the Netherlands, most recently at a meeting in Brussels.' Klein Lankhorst says the ministry is very keen to create a 'materials roundabout' in the Netherlands. 'In fact, we do this now for a large number of waste streams because we already recycle eighty per cent of our waste. But we can do much more, for example in textiles,

plastics, electronics and phosphate. The government is pushing for the recycling of these waste streams because we have the required expertise in the Netherlands and our industry sees opportunities for investing further in the processing of these waste streams.' International legislation makes it possible for other countries to obstruct the export of wastes. 'We have to accept this situation,' says Klein Lankhorst. 'My advice to the waste sector is to focus their efforts on countries which present the best

opportunities, such as the UK. It's no use wasting time trying to acquire waste in countries with a well organised recycling infrastructure.' In his recently published white paper on waste, the state secretary for infrastructure and environment, Joop Atsma, announced plans to reduce the administrative burden of the Waste Shipment Regulation, which the waste companies find particularly onerous. For example, from the end of next year companies will be able to submit notifications of waste shipments digitally, which will shorten application procedures.

Spanjaard is pleased about the government's attitude to obtaining R1 status for waste-to-energy plants. 'The ministry and NL Agency have adopted a proactive stance, which we appreciate very much. Government policy has been very supportive.' Deprez is also optimistic. 'The Dutch government has taken a clear position, and is willing to pursue policies to back this up. But the proof of the pudding is in the eating.'

**WASTE IMPORTS TO WASTE-TO-ENERGY PLANTS
 FROM 2009 TO MAY 2011**



Source: NL Agency

**PATRICK DEPREZ (VAN
 GANSEWINKEL GROUP):**
 'Our competitive position
 is only getting better.'