

# PLASTICS RECYCLING

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## Plastics industry 'on right track' to eliminate landfilling, EU says

As the European Commission prepares to review the EU's waste targets, the plastics industry, a symbol of the EU's 'throw-away society', is one of the focal points in discussions on resource efficiency.

The policy review includes a look at key targets in EU waste legislation, a "fitness check" of the directives dealing with waste streams, including sewage sludge and packaging, among others, and an assessment of how best to tackle plastic waste.

The EU has aspirational goals to virtually eliminate landfilling, have reuse and recycling at their maximum feasible level, limiting energy recovery to recyclable waste, and decreasing the generation of waste, all by the year 2020.

Plastic waste is a key component. Last year, the Commission published the results of a public consultation, or 'green paper', on plastic waste, which Janez Potočnik, the European commissioner for the environment, has called "drastic" due to its negative effects on the environment.



Photo: Frank Fiedler/Shutterstock

Respondents to the green paper called for greater collection and recycling rates and a ban on landfilling the material.

The industry has undertaken a voluntary commitment to eliminate landfilling by 2020, as well as promote recycling and energy recovery, when recycling is not possible.

"Eliminating or reducing waste is crucial to achieve a better resource efficiency society," a spokesperson for PlasticsEurope, an industry association, told EurActiv in emailed comments. "We encourage focusing on reuse as a first priority, and then to sustainably recycle

plastics whenever it is possible to do so. However, when sustainable recycling isn't an option, we look at getting that last drop of oil out of this valuable resource. Thus, we look at energy recovery".

This is in line with the EU's waste hierarchy, which calls for prevention first, followed by reuse, recycling and energy recovery, with landfilling last.

According to Potočnik's spokesperson, the plastics industry, whose products have seen an "explosion" in their use since the 1950s, "understand their responsibility".

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“It sounds like they’re on the right track,” Joe Hennon told EurActiv.

To Stefan Arditì of the European Environmental Bureau (EEB), a green pressure group, the industry will have to make sure that it does indeed reuse or recycle as much plastic as it can, and not fall back on incineration, the less environmentally-friendly option. The industry has mentioned 50% recycling and 50% incineration by 2020, as a way to end landfilling.

“The European Parliament has suggested between 70 and 80% recycling, depending on which MEP, for plastic for 2020. The plastic recycling industry (UPR) had made a study showing that it could be feasible,” said Arditì. “That means that everyone is asking for a higher recycling rate. That’s first why 50% recycling is not at all ambitious, when you consider for packaging and municipal waste.”

Some 37% of Europe’s waste ends up in landfills, while 25% is recycled, 15% composted and 23% burned, according to EU statistics from last year.

“Commissioner Potocnik’s first step to stop landfilling ASAP is therefore good, even if this means more incineration with energy recovery – always better than landfill because it replaces imported energy,” said Roel van’t Veer, of TEPPFA, the European plastic pipes and fittings association.

“Surely it is more beneficial to have more recycling. But this will require a lot of development in countries that are now mainly landfilling waste: there will have to come with collection systems for waste connected to sorting systems and proper recycling systems,” he said in emailed comments.

The construction sector, however, is viewed as a prime area for improvements in resource efficiency.

Hennon told EurActiv: “In order to be resource efficient, the three most resource heavy sectors are food, transport and construction. It’s the [construction] sector where it’s most possible to use recycled materials.”

## EU to align environmental gauges for construction products

The European Commission intends to align existing methods and standards to assess environmental performances of construction products, with the objective of favouring “green” comparisons, and higher levels of recycling and reuse.

will revise the two gauges, with the aim of reconciling them. “We do not want both a standard and a method in three years’ time,” said Michele Galatola, an EU Commission official from the environment division.

The industry is pleased to see a simplification of existing rules, but fears that the process may end up in new, unwanted provisions.

The two key controversies concern the use of benchmarks to compare the environment-friendly performances of products and, specifically for the plastic sector, the negative impact on recycling derived from the possible expanding of the list of dangerous substances under the REACH regulation on chemicals.



Photo: Christos Doukteridis/Flickr

By 2017, existing competing environmental rules and procedures for construction products should be harmonised to increase regulatory clarity and sustainability.

Currently, the sector follows the standard EN 15804 to assess the environmental impact of construction products, and the Product Environmental Footprint (PEF) method, released by the EU Executive in April 2013.

At the end of the ongoing 3-year pilot phase for the PEF, the Commission

### A question of benchmark

“We do not see any sense in comparing different environmental product declarations,” said Gerald Feigenbutz, executive director of EPPA, the association bringing together European manufacturers of window systems based on polyvinyl chloride (PVC), one of the most common plastics.

A benchmark, indicating if a product

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is above or below the environmental average, is seen as controversial, because it could favour certain producers over others, while not necessarily guaranteeing the greenest options.

The use of benchmarks is under fire in many sectors, including, for example, food retailing. The so-called 'traffic light' system adopted in UK supermarkets, to allegedly rank products' healthiness is causing a battle at EU level.

Producers complain that healthy products such as oil of olive get lower marks than drinks less-known for their health advantages, like Coke. Playing with the benchmarks is easy, they argue, calling for the abolition of the label system.

Although spread across several fields, the controversy over benchmarking assumes peculiar characteristics in the construction sector.

The Commission says that consumers are little aware of environmental labels, and that, at the moment, there is too much information, which equates to no

information at all.

According to a recent Eurobarometer poll, 48% of European consumers are confused by the stream of environmental information they receive.

A simpler system of comparison among green performances may lead consumers to choose more environment-friendly and healthy products, also privileging those more adept at reuse, and recycling.

"Consumers should be able to make comparisons on construction products not only based on costs, but also on environmental performances," Karen Allacker, a researcher at the Leuven university, argued during a debate on Tuesday (29 April) in Brussels, organised by TEPPFA, the European association of companies active in the sector of plastic pipes and fittings.

The Commission acknowledges, however, that benchmarks can be applied to certain products, "but not to others," explained Galatola, adding that any decision "should be based on facts".

### Health vs recycling?

The other thorny issue concerns how to classify certain chemicals used in constructions.

A strict application of the REACH regulation may outlaw some substances that are currently widely used. Beyond the obvious costs of replacing banned materials with less dangerous substances, the industry fears that this may have a bad impact on recycling targets, as old materials would no longer be fit for reuse.

This problem is particularly felt in the plastic sector (see EurActiv story), but concerns also other chemical-intensive industries, such a rubber, ceramics and crystals.

Dangerous substances, such as lead, are already being replaced voluntarily by the industry, but other substances may end up in the eyesight of the EU Agency for chemicals, with unpredictable consequences.

Ironically, a crusade to increase health and environmental protection may cause a significant reduction in recycling.



# EU must end landfilling, says top environment official

The European Union's lead civil servant for the environment has called for a ban on landfilling and warned that separate collection is not enough if the EU is to improve its environmental performance.

"Separate collection is very much at the heart of this circular economy ... [but] we are coming to realise that separate collection is not enough," said Karl Falkenberg, the European Commission's director-general for environment, at a conference in Brussels on Tuesday (29 April).

Falkenberg, speaking at the event hosted by TEPPFA, the European plastic pipes and fittings association, added that an EU-wide ban on landfilling would provide "security for recyclers". The event was the first satellite event before Green Week, an annual conference on European environmental policy, which is to take place from 3 to 5 June, in Brussels.

This would encourage re-use or

material recycling, or encourage waste management companies to transform waste into energy, through incineration.

"We need to close the easy door to landfilling," he said, emphasising the environmental damage and human health risks posed by this form of waste management.

"China is maybe the best demonstration of the environmental cost of our way of producing. How do we ensure that our air remains reasonably clear, that our drinking water is not making anyone sick? All of this makes real sense," he said.

## Plastic: 'fantastic' but 'drastic'

Falkenberg's directorate has focused much of its work on plastic, which has been referred to by the EU's environment commissioner, Janez Potočnik, as both "fantastic", due to its adaptability, but "drastic", due to its environmental impact.

Last year the directorate carried out a public consultation on plastic waste, in which respondents called for greater collection and recycling rates and a ban on landfilling. Regulation is expected this year.

"Plastic is one of those materials that can be recycled over and over again. Streams in which we collect need to be organised for recycling," said Falkenberg, also issuing a call to plastic producers to

be careful that the materials that they use are amenable to recycling and do not pose a health risk.

The environment directorate is expected to release a target of 70% plastic recycling by 2020.

"We want clear messages that this is the direction that society is moving", Falkenberg said, adding that this would allow "sound investment decisions". "Those are the broad lines we are trying to develop for our circular economy," he added.

Members of the plastic industry called for a regulatory framework that was "supportive rather than restrictive" of this goal.



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