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as “not waste”.’ (photo: BIR)*

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## **BIR’S FRANCIS VEYS – ADVOCATE FOR RECYCLING**

# **‘We turn waste into non-waste’**

**It cannot be a coincidence. Francis Veys and the Bureau of International Recycling (BIR) were born in the same year: 1948. He has now been working at BIR for 35 years. The European recycling industry is approaching a new turning point, predicts Veys. ‘Within ten years the recycling market will shift to Asia.’**

BY MICHEL ROBLES

‘Making sure that our mills, plants and yards around the world are supplied with quality materials, by which I also mean environmental quality’, is BIR’s raison d’être, according to Director General Francis Veys. He has been working at BIR for 35 years and is approaching ‘the end of the trip’, as he calls it. ‘Luckily I shall stay on for at least three more years, assisting the new president and future director general.’

Talking about the establishment of BIR in the post-war years, he says: ‘Did you know that our origins lie in the Netherlands? It was an initiative by the scrap merchant

Hugo Nijkerk, who later founded the Federatie Herwinning Grondstoffen. The aim was to strengthen the supply of secondary raw materials in post-war Europe. Members from other countries gradually joined. Today our membership is spread over seventy countries, with about 800 companies from across the full range of recycling activities and 40 national associations representing tens of thousands of companies. Half are from Europe, 20 per cent are from America, 25 per cent from Asia and the Middle East, and the remaining 5 per cent from elsewhere. But the centre of gravity of recycling activity is visibly shifting. Every month new Asian companies apply for membership.’

The scope of BIR’s activities is global, but in the years to come the focus of its attention will increasingly lie in the East. ‘We must ensure that the booming Asian recycling industry operates to high quality standards. Even now, some Chinese plants have more advanced equipment than several European ones! Traditional European industry as we know it is dying. Demand, and therefore production – including the secondary materials industry, will have shifted to Asia by 2020 or thereabouts.’ But this does not mean the end of European recycling: ‘In the next ten years resource management may be the best way to reorganise existing European industries. Recycling will be an important part of that process. Ultimately, the future for European industry, including recycling, will lie in new hi-tech technologies, probably small scale and decentralised.’ On a global scale Veys even predicts a bright future for the recycling industry: ‘By 2020 we’ll be the world’s biggest supplier of raw materials, surpassing the suppliers of primary raw materials.’

*go to page 15 »*



## TRADE ORGANISATION

According to Veys, this shift to the East is not the first big change in the market since BIR was founded. 'Until the mid-1970s BIR was first and foremost an international trade organisation that resisted protectionist trade barriers. It was not until 1975 that the environment entered the picture. Growing environmental concerns and the first EU Waste Management Directive prompted BIR to broaden its activities. Before then, recyclers only accepted high grade scrap and other waste materials, never any low grade or potentially hazardous waste. Household waste was for waste collection and treatment companies, not for recyclers.'

In the meantime, these two worlds have grown much closer together. 'Recyclers now accept household waste streams like glass and plastics, and waste companies are

highly active in recycling.' Nowadays BIR devotes much of its time to supporting its members on environmental issues. 'We do a lot of environmental training and facilitating, helping our members to disseminate new technologies and instructing them in the technicalities of the legislation.'

*An average stainless steel object is composed of about 60 per cent recycled material (photo: iStockphoto)*

Francis Veys (1948) is a Belgian citizen. He studied European Law at the University of Leuven. He originally aspired to a career in the political arena, but at 27 he went to work for the BIR as the assistant to then secretary general, Marcel Doisy, and was appointed secretary general in 1981. In the mid-1980s he was appointed executive director of the European BIR daughter associations: EUROMETREC (non-ferrous metal scrap), EFR (ferrous scrap) and ERPA (recovered paper). He has been director general of BIR since 1995. Veys is married and has two children. Besides his job, is he personally involved in recycling? 'Belgium operates a well-organised system of source-separated household waste collection and I've always done my bit. My environmental footprint? Unfortunately, riding a bicycle to work on a daily basis is not an option in my job. But I do drive a nice little Smart.'

## WASTE STATUS

An environmental landmark for the recycling sector was the 1989 Basel Convention, signed by 170 countries. The Convention established rules for hazardous waste, which also apply to many secondary raw materials. 'Suddenly, all kinds of materials we had been transporting for decades without any problem became "waste" and were subject to an increasingly complex set of regulations. So we set out to obtain clarification on what materials and substances were now classified as waste, starting with the member countries of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).'

Veys emphasises that BIR members 'definitely do not deal in waste'. For that reason he applauds the end-of-waste criteria being drawn up by the countries of the EU. The criteria for waste streams such as scrap iron, paper and glass determine when they lose their 'waste' status and become 'products'. 'We advocate workable end-of-waste criteria, both within Europe and worldwide. But we must be realistic. The European system cannot be rolled out on a global level because China, Japan and the USA take different approaches. For instance, China uses methods like registration obligations for trading companies and fixed lists of "recyclables" and other categories. We propose agreements at the UN level to designate all materials that do meet certain quality criteria as "not waste".'

Recurring issues for the sector are waste transport scandals and the waste shipment regulations introduced in response to these. 'EU member states do not all enforce the regulations in the same way. International coordination is needed. We inform and educate our members and we lobby from our head office in Brussels, but

we cannot enter into direct dialogue with national governments. We leave that to the national recycling associations.'

Something that BIR really must get to grips with, according to Veys, is the undeservedly bad reputation of recycling. 'The old disreputable image of the scrap merchant is totally outdated. We are The Recyclers: the ones that change waste into non-waste!'

## LANDFILL DIRECTIVE

To negotiate on legislation and enforcement, BIR regularly turns to organisations like the OECD and the World Trade Organization, as well as UN bodies like the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and of course the institutions of the European Union. The EU is busily working on new regulations. One of these is a new revision of the Landfill Directive, which might include a European landfill ban on recoverable materials and untreated waste. Surprisingly, Francis Veys is critical of such proposals: 'There are already enough regulations to be implemented at all levels. Let's assess the situation over the next ten years and see what is necessary.' Likewise, he has doubts about the possible benefits to the recycling sector of the new European 'flagship' policy on resource efficiency. He supports the general idea, 'but isn't it old wine in new bottles?'

However, he does agree that revising the EU Emissions Trading Scheme would definitely help the recycling industry. Under the revised system not only will the recipients of secondary materials receive carbon credits, but also the suppliers, who would effectively become certified recycling companies. Veys believes that, at first sight, it seems an excellent idea, 'but the danger is that everybody will want to join the bandwagon as a new way to make money. It is a tricky discussion. But yes, we are looking into it carefully.'



**'By 2020 our sector will be the world's biggest supplier of raw materials.'**

