



Inferior exports are killing innovation, claims Zonneveld

Those exports of used electronics ending up in the informal recycling sectors of the third world are proving destructive for well-meaning companies that want to invest in new and innovative processing, according to Norbert Zonneveld of the European Electronics Recyclers Association. This and other related topics were highlighted at the BIR E-Scrap Committee's meeting in Warsaw.

The e-scrap export issue provided much food for debate at the BIR E-Scrap Committee gathering in Warsaw. And that's no surprise, because debate is guaranteed when recyclers' representatives from Europe and the USA are attending the same event.

Both the European Electronics Recyclers Association (EERA) and the US Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries (ISRI) agree on the importance of stopping the illegal dumping of toxic e-waste in developing countries. However, they differ markedly in their approach to legislation and regulation relating to the collection, recovery and recycling of used electronics.

ISRI stands for free trade in used electronics and does not see it as a problem if, when certain conditions are met, e-scrap is exported to non-OECD countries and to countries that have not signed the Basel Convention (the USA is among those not to have signed). ISRI is in favour of voluntary standards,

and promotes the R2 andRIOS standards. It also promotes a voluntary scheme for certification.

Meanwhile, EERA advocates implementation of the European standards for collection, transport and treatment of used electronics, which is in line with the approach of the European Commission. The standards were developed by CENELEC, the European Committee for Electrotechnical Standardization. EERA opposes the export of used electronics to non-OECD countries and to countries that have not signed the Basel Convention. According to the association, used electronics should be exported only when the receiving operator fully complies with the European standards on the treatment of electronics.

Not enough volume

It is exactly at this point where things go wrong, according to EERA's executive secretary Norbert Zonneveld. Too many inferior exports were ending up

'in non-OECD countries and the informal sector in China', he said in Warsaw, describing this as destructive for well-intentioned companies that were willing to invest in new, innovative processing and wanted to have a leading role in tapping the urban mine 'but simply don't get enough volumes in to make investments pay'. Zonneveld believes that, on this issue, the visions of EERA and ISRI are 'deviating tremendously'.

But in response, ISRI president Robin Wiener said: 'Our visions actually come pretty close. We too aim at illegal operations to be shut down.' Eric Harris, ISRI's associate counsel, director of government and international affairs, noted that growing volumes of the materials of concern were coming from within the developing countries themselves. 'Look at China,' he said. 'There are so many people; they have laptops and mobile phones. We are talking about fast-increasing numbers.'

Producer has become a brand

Another issue highlighted at the meeting in Warsaw is the role of the electronics producers. Recyclers have been calling on manufacturers to make products easier to recycle but this has not led as yet to a broad design-for-recycling strategy. According to Zonneveld, it was proving very difficult to co-operate constructively with the electronics industries. 'We have tried so many times,' he said. Despite requests for them to make their products 'in such a way that we can dismantle them and simply click out the components', he added, 'there has been little interest from the producers' side'. Nowadays, a producer was not even an assembler but rather 'a brand', Zonneveld maintained. 'Take HP, for instance, with 150 suppliers in a chain, and they can't tell you whether the cobalt inside a product is coming from the Congo or not.'

But the speaker did identify some good news: for the first time, the electronics industries had been broadly involved in the drafting of the new Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment directive covering collection, recovery and recycling in Europe. According to Zonneveld, this proved the industries' willingness at last to take recycling goals seriously. □