

Textiles

Dark days for Europe's textile recyclers



Since the previous BIR Textiles Division meeting in sunny Monte-Carlo, conditions for the textiles recycling sector had 'darkened like the weather', it was suggested at the Round-Table gathering in Brussels. Declining material quality and an increase in competition were just two of the many problems highlighted.

From left: Seddik Zerroug of Framimex, France; Joan Smaal of Joan Smaal Textielrecycling, The Netherlands; and Stefaan Rubbens of Evadam, Belgium.

Europe's textile recycling sector employs some 150 000 people, recycles between three and four million tonnes of material each year and handles goods with a value of approximately Euro 3000 million. Nevertheless, the sector is struggling to cover costs on many of its operations and is beset with problems, including a decline in the overall quality of incoming material, payment difficulties and increasing competition, it was stated in Brussels.

Michael Sigloch of VTB GmbH in Germany suggested that the textile recycling sector stood 'on the verge of collapse' because of the diminishing quality of its supplies and difficulties in marketing goods because of their association with 'waste'. 'Bank accounts are empty and jobs are in danger,' he told delegates. 'We recycle large volumes of material but we are still waiting for some thanks from society for our efforts.'

According to the speaker, processing costs in Eastern Europe were up to 80% lower while religious/charity organisations are benefitting from volunteer labour and are able to market their production as 'relief goods', thereby avoiding export controls. According to BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof Schepke of FWS GmbH, Germany the aim of the textile recycling industry was

not to attack charity groups but to ensure that commercial recyclers were protected against subsidised operations. At the same time, he added: 'The textile recycling industry in Europe is at a clear competitive disadvantage.'

Decline in quality

Having heard Seddik Zerroug of French firm Framimex highlight the need for the textile recycling sector to increase its public profile, Klaus Löwer of Hans Löwer Recycling GmbH in Germany complained that European graders enjoyed far less political support than their counterparts in the USA. He also expressed concern that textile recycling activities were gravitating towards low-wage countries.

Pointing to price falls of 25-30%, Joan Smaal of Joan Smaal Textielrecycling BV in The Netherlands noted a gradual decline in the quality of originals over recent years. Competition from the U.S. was also a significant problem while African qualities were currently experiencing a dearth of demand, he added. Mr Smaal suggested the survival of Europe's graders was under threat if there was no major change in its circumstances and if their cost base remained so much higher than those of competing regions of the world.

The report from Stefaan Rubbens of Evadam NV in Belgium suggested that hopes for a market pick-up in September had been dashed in Octo-

ber. There had been a reduction in the purchasing power of African nations and 'strong competition' from new clothing, particularly from China. Given the 'considerable' decline in the overall quality of originals this year, 'we have to enlarge the margin to continue to survive', he said.

Disreputed EU Waste Directive

Alexander Gläser, Executive Director of the German federation Fachverband Textil-Recycling eV, described European waste legislation as 'entirely counter-productive' for textile recyclers, adding that it was 'absolutely essential' for customs codes and legislation relating to textile recycling to be 'thoroughly reformed'. He added: 'The European Waste Directive is coming into disrepute - it has created unimaginable barriers.'

Mr Gläser went on to highlight the 'unacceptable behaviour' of some of those countries currently looking to join the European Union. Poland, for example, had imposed its own licensing system which was preventing competition. In the African market, meanwhile, the U.S. had concluded agreements with a number of countries relating to the financing of exports. Europe had to consider similar measures to ensure the African market remained open, he said.

Mr Gläser pointed out that church and charity organisations did not have to pay some of their workers, resulting in a 'distortion' of competi-

tion. 'In my view,' he added, 'this is a clear infraction of the EC treaty.'

The guest speaker concluded with a breakdown of the estimated 3.5 million tonnes of textiles recycled in Europe each year. Mr Gläser believed that this total comprised: 45% second-hand clothing, 20% wiping rags, 25% textile raw material, and 10% materials for filling, insulation etc. Some 30% of the used clothing went to Eastern Europe, 25% to Africa and 20% remained in Western Europe. □



BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof W. Schepke.



Guest Speaker Alexander Gläser, Executive Director of the German Fachverband Textil-Recycling.

By Ian Martin