Plastics associations criticise removal of landfill ban for recyclable waste

Recyclers hope EU Parliament and Council will introduce changes

(EU) – The European Commission's new circular economy package lacks specific measures to encourage the recycling of plastics across Europe, according to industry representatives. "Recycling targets have been weakened, [a] landfill ban is no longer foreseen, the recycling calculation methodology remains ambiguous, waste exports are not covered and waste sorting and quality is not tackled", said Antonino Furfari, director of the association Plastics Recyclers Europe (PRE), in response to the proposals for amending EU waste legislation presented by the Commission at the beginning of December (EUWID 25/2015).

In Mr Furfari's view, "waste management needs clear guidance in order to perform efficiently", but this revised circular economy package is lacking "concrete actions". As one example, he pointed out that sorting waste is a "fundamental step" to close material loops, but sorting is not defined in any EU legislation.

PRE said it was now looking forward to positive discussions in the European Parliament and Council in order to achieve "a truly more ambitious package". If growth is the goal of the Commission under President Jean-Claude Juncker, "this package will need more input from the institutions and stakeholders", said the association.

The industry association European Plastics Converters (EuPC) welcomed the new package and many of the initiatives it contains, but said it was concerned "that the level of legal clarity contained in the package is not sufficient to guide companies in Europe towards a circular economy". "EuPC was hoping for more clarity and harmonisation of the existing EU waste legislation across the EU 28 member states; however, we fail to see a harmonised approach in the package", said Alexandre Dangis, the organisation's managing director. The association therefore questioned "the level of ambition of this new proposal on provisions on landfilling, extended producer responsibility (EPR) schemes and end-of-waste criteria", he added.

The proposed legislation needs "more clarity" on the difference between recycling and reuse, according to EuPC. As well, the calculation methodology for recycling and reuse rates remains "ambiguous". The Commission now proposes reducing the landfilling of municipal waste to 10 per cent of arisings by 2030 instead of its former plans for a landfill ban for recyclables by 2025, an option also supported by EuPC.

EuPC noted that the proposal also included economic incentives for producers to put greener products on the market and support recovery and recycling schemes. Mr Dangis said: "Plastics converters are constantly innovating to produce more sustainable products and are working on increasing the recovery and recycling of their products in the building and construction sector, packaging sector, automotive and many more".

Plastics Europe, the trade association representing plastics producers, welcomed the proposed circular economy package as "a step closer to resource efficiency" but bemoaned the fact that the industry's calls for landfill restrictions on all recyclable and recoverable waste from 2025 were not heard. The Commission's target of sending just 10 per cent of the amount of municipal waste generated to landfill by 2030 is a step in the right direction but is a "timid attempt" to put an end to landfilling resources, said Karl-H. Foerster, executive director of PlasticsEurope.

The proposed 2025 minimum quota of 55 per cent for recycling and preparation for re-use for plastic packaging waste is "extremely ambitious", according to PlasticsEurope, which pointed out the average plastics packaging recycling rate in Europe was under 40 per cent in 2014. The implications of the combined target as well as the new calculation method "are currently unclear", the association said. PlasticsEurope cited a study carried out by the consulting group Denkstatt that found the optimum level for plastic packaging recycling was between 35 and 50 per cent, depending on a country's collection, sorting and recycling capacities.

PlasticsEurope welcomes the European Commission's action plan for the circular economy, saying that its more holistic approach combined with taking into account the entire life-cycle of products "will help make Europe more sustainable and resource efficient". Mr Foerster added that the association also welcomes the Commission's intention to adopt a strategy on plastics. □

Role of recycling in climate protection highlighted in Paris

(WW) – The global recycling industry saves up to 700 million tonnes of CO_2 emissions annually in the "personal evaluation" of Ranjit Baxi, president of the Bureau of International Recycling (BIR). Speaking at an event accompanying the world climate conference (COP21) in Paris in December, Mr Baxi said this adds up to several billion tonnes of carbon emissions when measured over the last few decades, underscoring the importance of supporting recycling and the recycling industry itself as a vital step towards climate protection. Governments should understand that facilitating the free international trade of valuable recoverable materials is needed to encourage promote recycling, emphasised the BIR president.

In his remarks, Mr Baxi drew attention to the study "Environmental Benefits of Recycling", carried out in 2008 on behalf of BIR by the Centre for Sustainable Production & Resource Efficiency (CSPRE) of Imperial College London which is currently being updated. The original study put the global CO_2 emission savings of recycling seven non-ferrous metals, ferrous scrap as well as recovered paper at 500 million tonnes per year, a number BIR equates to the total annual carbon dioxide emissions of the global aviation industry. Compared to primary production of the same metals, the recycling of aluminium reduces emissions by 92 per cent, with comparable savings of 65 per cent for copper and 85 per cent for iron and steel recovered from secondary materials, according to the study.

Mr Baxi also stressed that the numbers in the study were rather conservative and only take a sampling of recyclable commodities into account. He added that early results of the updated Imperial College study show CO_2 savings through recycling are on the rise.

At further COP21 side event, the European Recycling Industries Confederation (EuRIC) underscored the contributions made by steel recyclers to CO_2 reduction. At the same time, the association criticised the fact that the cost of complying with EU regulation remains extremely high for steelmakers using secondary raw materials.

Speaking on behalf of EuRIC, Manuel Burnand of the French recycling firm Derichebourg pointed out that electric arc furnace (EAF) steelmakers using steel scrap as their main raw material are therefore seriously disadvantaged compared to basic oxygen furnace (BOF) plants relying on primary raw materials. "Such distortions cannot last longer if we are serious about climate change and want to move towards a circular economy, in particular as Europe is resource-rich when it comes to steel scrap, which is not the case for iron ore", Mr Burnand pointed out.

In Germany alone, the share of EAF steel production has dropped to a historic low of less than 30 per cent of total crude steel output. Due to the resulting decline in scrap consumption, the price of steel scrap continues to fall dramatically, "jeopardising the economic viability of a number of steel scrap recycling companies in Europe." Mr Burnand concluded: "It is time to acknowledge the huge benefits recycling brings to the environment and society in terms of CO_2, energy and natural resource savings and for policy-makers to translate these into legislation." □