



Textile recycling can no longer be offered free of charge

By Ian Martin

Europe's textile recycling industry continued to face a bleak outlook, not least because of competition from cheap new clothing of Far Eastern origin, payment problems among customers, and an 'unworkable' ratio of wearable to unwearable clothing. Conditions had to improve if the industry were to survive, was the warning issued at the BIR Textiles Division meeting in Berlin.

This concession offered only limited comfort to a beleaguered European textile recycling industry. BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof Schepke of Germany told the meeting in Berlin that collection of used clothes and other textiles was 'not a profitable business'. A large number of collection containers had been removed because they were making a loss or were simply 'too expensive to empty'. Meanwhile, many companies and charity organisations had chosen to withdraw from the sector, partly because the ratio of unwearable to wearable clothing was an 'unworkable' 70% to 30%, he estimated.

More pressure needed

Given that the European textile recycling industry was responsible for saving an estimated 3.5 million tonnes of material from landfill every year and for creating around 150 000 jobs, Mr Schepke suggested that more pressure needed to be applied to politicians within the EU in order to ensure that clothing and shoe manufacturers/distributors contributed towards the recycling and disposal of their products.

Textiles recycling 'is no longer a service that can be offered free of charge', declared Textiles Division Honorary President Klaus Löwer of Germany. Noting that non-marketable textiles were accepted without charge at landfill sites in Japan, he said 'free return of sorting residues and non-marketable textiles would be a big help in Europe'. He pointed to the recent crop of insolvencies and plant closure before suggesting that, if market conditions did not improve in the

near future, 'we can pack our bags'.

In what had been a 'disastrous' 2004 to date, Alan Wheeler of the U.K. Textile Recycling Association highlighted the cash flow problems surrounding African buyers, competition from cheap new clothing of Far Eastern origin, and a 'large excess of materials of all grades on the market'. In addition, a 'plague of rogue traders' had been picking up goods 'under false pretences' and selling to the industry's traditional markets, often without 'going to the expense and inconvenience of acquiring waste carriers and waste management licences'.

He went on to say: 'There is no uncut wiping cloth trade left in the U.K. and the price that the mills are paying for recyclables is at an all-time low.' In some instances, prices were failing even to cover the cost of the freight in the U.K., he added.

'Predatory' pricing

Reporting on the French market, Michèle Launay also spoke of payment problems in Africa as well as of the termination of some major door-to-door textile collection activities. 'Unsold items are becoming more and more numerous,' she confirmed. Meanwhile, the German market was suffering from the 'increasingly predatory' pricing of new clothing from the Far East while a general lack of Third World demand for the industry's goods was putting tens of thousands of jobs at risk, according to Gunther Krippendorf. And Sauro Ballerini of Italy warned that, without a change of market conditions in the near future, 'we won't be here any longer to talk about it'.



Guest Speaker Dr Andreas Jaron, Head of Division at Germany's Ministry for the Environment (left) and BIR Textiles Division President Frithjof Schepke of Germany.



Michèle Launay, Secretary General of the French recycling federation Federec and BIR's Environmental & Technical Director Ross Bartley.

The report from Hans Brak of Vereniging Herwinning Textiel in The Netherlands spoke of a substantial drop in his association's membership numbers, mainly as a result of company failures. Many firms were looking instead to set up plants in countries where the labour costs were lower than those in Europe, he said.

A market report from Australia also mentioned the pressure imposed on the textile recycling sector by the availability of cheap new clothing from Asia 'at below the second-hand price'. Survival might ultimately depend on having operations in countries where costs were lower, it was suggested. □

The Siegessäule (Victory Column) towers in the middle of Tiergarten on a square called the 'Grosser Stern'. The monument commemorates the triumphs of the Prussian army.

Legislators were not focusing their attention directly on the textiles recycling sector 'because it had not been identified as a problem,' it was stated in Berlin by Dr Andreas Jaron, Head of Division at Germany's Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety. Intervention was really required only in instances where difficulties existed 'but the textiles sector is not giving environmental problems,' he underlined.