



Textile recycling requires urgent political attention

The BIR Textiles Division board took the unusual step of devising a press statement immediately prior to the Round-Table meeting in London to underline the gravity of the crisis facing the sector. While much of the debate in London focused on poor market conditions and plant closures, the guest presentation lifted spirits by underlining the positive impact of the second-hand clothing trade on a key African market.

By Ian Martin



Textiles Division Board member Michael Sigloch of Fachverband Textil-Recycling eV in Germany.



Dr Simone Field, Project Manager from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the UK.



Divisional President Frithjof W. Schepke of Schepke Konzepte in Germany: '.....low sales prices, increasing transportation costs and payment difficulties.'

The recycling industry generally fights shy of political intervention, preferring instead to allow free trade and market forces to guide their business fortunes. However, BIR Textiles Division board members drew up a press statement immediately prior to the latest Round-Table gathering in which they called for 'immediate political support', as well as recognition for the industry and worldwide free trade. They added: 'We are looking for discussion with governments, the textile producing and importing industry to create an acceptable future for textiles recycling.'

Noting that 'the general market value of all recovered textiles has decreased considerably', the statement insisted that the textiles recycling sector was no longer able to provide its services at no cost to the public, it declared.

The statement emphasised the environmental benefits delivered by the textiles recycling sector in terms of saving both energy and water. 'Experts have found out that you need 16,000 litres of water to produce 1kg of cotton,' it pointed out.

Manufacturer's liability

The BIR Textiles Board's gloomy assessment of business prospects was echoed in the market reports presented to the Round-Table in London, several of which referred to plant closures and companies leaving the sector. Divisional President Frithjof W. Schepke of Schepke Konzepte in Germany reported low sales prices, increasing transportation costs, payment difficulties and a 'hesitant' market for many of the industry's goods. 'Some items remain in



(Photo: Bert Garino)

The Big Ben is perhaps London's most famous building.

stock like lead weights,' he lamented.

According to Mr Schepke, discussions in Germany had touched on the notion of applying product liability to the textiles sector - 'but no-one wants to pay for it'. Board member Michael Sigloch of Fachverband Textil-Recycling eV in Germany urged politicians to address the possibility of liability of manufacture and to take into consideration the recycling sector's environmental contribution. 'We need some kind of subsidy,' he insisted.

Reporting for the UK, Terry Ralph of Terimpex Ltd described traders as 'despondent' and bemoaned the pressure placed on the textiles sector by 'petty-fogging bureaucracy'. He noted that one large company had closed three sorting plants in the UK and moved operations to other parts of the world where costs were considerably lower. This prompted Mr Schepke to comment: 'I am not sure that textile recycling has a future along current lines in Europe. Perhaps the only way for us to continue is to relocate to cheap-wage countries where we are not hedged about by red tape or denied access to certain markets.'

Licensing

Honorary President of the BIR Textiles Division Klaus Löwer of Hans Löwer Recycling GmbH in Germany noted that a working group had been established in the USA to discuss the licensing of sorters and traders. He commented: 'We could look at doing this in Europe but there needs to be a political will. Everybody wants textiles to be recycled but no action is taken to help us and companies continue to go to the wall.'

The mood of the meeting was lifted by a guest presentation from Dr Simone Field, Project Manager from the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in the UK. From her detailed assessment of the Kenyan market, she had concluded that the second-hand clothing trade directly or indirectly affected 5 million people in terms of providing jobs or income generation - a 'substantial' contribution in a country with 40% unemployment. The trade also allowed very poor people to clothe themselves and their families, and offered increased consumer choice, she added. □