



Waste management policy works, but waste prevention is key

Waste management policy in the EU is successfully reducing the proportion of waste that is sent to landfill and cutting greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions caused by inefficient waste management, according to a new study. However, the study also supports greater efforts channelled into waste prevention.

EU waste management policy has developed substantially since 1990 and, as a result, recycling and composting have increased, and landfill use has decreased. The main focus of policy development has been in the introduction of recycling initiatives and waste targets, including those under the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive¹ and the Landfill Directive². Under these directives, Member States are now working towards targets for increasing the proportion of waste that is recycled or reused and for reducing the proportion of biodegradable municipal waste that is landfilled relative to a 1995 baseline. Prior to 1990, there were no such targets.

The new study reviews EU waste policy. Overall, it presents a positive picture of EU policy's effect on waste management practices across Member States. Key figures show considerable progress. Landfilling decreased from 62 per cent to 40 per cent between 1995 and 2008, while recycling increased from 16 per cent to 39 per cent.

However, the overall amount of waste generated has increased and, across the EU, progress on recycling and landfill targets is extremely variable. For example, figures for 2006 show that while some Member States, including Germany, Austria and Denmark, now send less than 10 per cent of their biodegradable waste to landfill, others, including the UK, Ireland, Greece and Poland, still send more than 75 per cent to landfill.

Overall, GHG emissions from waste in the EU have fallen. Direct emissions from transport, treatment, landfill, incineration and recycling processes started to reduce in 2000, helped by the greater efficiency of waste management systems and the shift towards recycling. Although recycling also produces GHG emissions, these are fewer than those associated with landfill and thus the overall trend is downwards. According to the study, reductions in GHG emissions from better waste management should equate to around 60 million CO₂ equivalents between 1990 and 2012, which is approximately 18 per cent of the reduction in GHG emissions required by the EU under Kyoto Protocol targets.

However, waste reduction requires other approaches. Currently, total waste volumes are increasing means that it is becoming harder to meet landfill targets. The Waste Framework Directive³ of 2008 sets a framework for waste prevention, including national programmes and objectives. In parallel it further pushes for better management of generated waste, including a 50 per cent recycling target for 2020 for household and similar wastes. The study suggests eco-design and product standards could help Member States meet these targets.

1. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/packaging/index_en.htm
2. http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/landfill_index.htm
3. <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/framework/index.htm>

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