Fast food industry falling short on recycling targets

European laws aim to ensure that 60 per cent of packaging waste is recycled by the end of 2008. But in the fast food industry the majority of packaging still ends up in landfill sites, although the materials – mainly wood-based materials such as cardboard and paper - are easy to recycle. Research into McDonald’s outlets in Finland found that only 29 per cent of packaging waste was being recycled, although theoretically 93 per cent of the packaging could be recycled.

In 2002, 1937 tonnes of packaging waste were produced by Finland’s 87 McDonald’s outlets, but only 564 tonnes were recycled (29 per cent). However, research suggests that only minor changes need to be made to existing waste collection infrastructures for up to 64 per cent of packaging to be recycled. Suggestion to improve recycling rates include colour coding of waste components, a sorting station for customers’ use, compactors for flattening packaging and clear pricing structures for collection.

Solid waste is divided into household, commercial or industrial categories but waste from the fast food industry has an unclear status. For example, it generates waste at the point of manufacture, at the point of sale, and at the point of consumption in households.

Member states implement European waste policies in their own laws but in Finland there is a high degree of autonomy among local authorities, which leads to a lack of consistency. This has resulted in a loophole where landfill tax is paid if the waste is collected by the local authority, but not if it is collected by private operators and consigned to industrial landfill sites.

To improve the recycling rate, researchers called for increased co-operation between waste management, public authorities and the producer organisations. Waste management practices should be designed and operated with the producers’ needs in mind. Public authorities need to develop uniform names for different types of waste, and uniform colour coding for different disposal bins to encourage waste sorting. Finally, government action is necessary to ensure consistency in the solid waste infrastructure and put commercial waste on a clear footing distinct from industrial and household waste.


Contact: anne.hamalainen@lut.fi

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