

Waste-to-energy plans get EU's nod of approval

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Environment ministers from the 27 EU countries yesterday (20 October) approved a new framework waste directive that includes provisions to burn waste for energy use as part of a five-step hierarchy prioritising prevention.

"By promoting the use of waste as a secondary resource, the new directive is intended to reduce the landfill of waste as well as potent greenhouse gases arising from such landfill sites," the ministers said in a statement following the Environment Council on 20 October.

Central to the revised EU approach is the introduction of a strict waste management hierarchy that governments and local authorities must apply when developing waste policy. The agreed five-step hierarchy includes:

1. Waste prevention (preferred option);
2. re-use;
3. recycling;
4. recovery (including energy recovery), and;
5. safe disposal (as a last resort).

Specifically, the new directive now considers "energy-efficient waste incineration" to be a recovery operation; a provision which EU ministers said will reduce consumption of fossil fuels and other natural resources.

BusinessEurope, the European employers' organisation, welcomed the increased clarity over the legal definition of waste but regretted that the EU had shied away from creating a true EU-wide waste market.

But health groups expressed concern about the wider environmental impact of incinerators and said burning more waste would release toxic pollutants in ecosystems and fine particles into the air. "We regret that we are going to see the amount of waste incinerated increase in the years to come, which would put even more fellow Europeans at risk," said the International Society of Doctors for the Environment in a June statement.

The directive's approval came after several years of tough negotiations between ministers and the European Parliament over a proposal to overhaul the EU's waste policy, originally tabled in 2005.

To reach a compromise, the Parliament had to drop any reference to binding waste prevention targets to be applied at national level (EurActiv 18/06/08). Instead, EU countries will have to

adopt waste prevention programmes five years after the directive comes into force, with the Commission subsequently releasing regular reports on progress made.

For the first time, the directive also introduces EU-wide recycling targets. By 2020, all EU countries must recycle 50% of their household waste and 70% of construction and demolition waste.

While they welcomed the targets, environmental groups have criticised them for being too low to make significant reductions in greenhouse gas emissions from landfills. They also regretted that the targets left aside other categories of waste.

<http://www.euractiv.com/en/environment/waste-energy-plans-get-eu-nod-approval/article-176548>