

The EU Council's position on the recast Renewable Energy Directive, if adopted, could lock EU member states into expensive and polluting waste-to-energy technologies that contradict the circular economy and climate objectives, writes Janek Vahk.

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The recast of the next Renewable Energy Directive currently under negotiation by the Council and the European Parliament risks locking EU member states into expensive waste-to-energy infrastructures for the next half-century if no safeguards are included.

To date, the Renewable Energy Directive has encouraged the practice of burning of mixed municipal solid waste to generate 'renewable' energy.

The effect so far has been a clear distortion of the waste market, whereby investment in waste infrastructure and operations costs are determined on the basis of subsidies for energy extraction from waste instead of sound environmental performance of the best waste management option.

As a result, many European countries have over-invested in waste-to-energy facilities whilst under-investing in recycling facilities.

Today over 80 million of tons of MSW is burnt in Europe, with large burning facilities located mainly in Northern and Western Europe - namely Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Finland and Belgium.

Not only has this led to the stagnation of waste prevention and recycling rates, but also to high green house emissions. In fact, a recent study shows that a typical waste incineration facility has a carbon intensity comparable to burning natural gas at an efficient power station.

In Central and Eastern Europe, the current waste incineration rates are relatively low and landfill has been the main destination of waste so far. Now, the Circular Economy legislation approved at EU level is pushing to reduce landfilling and increase recycling, which could be a real opportunity to drive better environmental standards in waste and resource management.

However, many Central and Eastern European countries are looking for 'quick technological fixes' to meet their renewable energy and waste obligations. In such a situation, it is paramount that the new Renewable Energy Directive provides the right incentives to invest in resource-efficient systems that prioritise separate collection, waste prevention and recycling as the best way to cut down landfilling, rather than promoting costly waste-to-energy infrastructure.

Yet the Council's position to allow renewable energy support for the extraction of energy

from mixed waste, accompanied by the lack of any sustainability criteria for the use of waste for energy does the contrary, and could result in more member states locking themselves into long-term contracts with oversized waste incineration facilities, as we have already seen in many countries.

If EU policies are to be coherent and promote a true environmental transition, the Renewable Energy Directive and the Circular Economy package must complement each other and pull in the same direction.

This implies ensuring that energy recovery from waste respects the principles of the waste hierarchy, in line with the recommendation of the Commission's Communication on the Role of Waste-to-Energy in the Circular Economy.

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