

Brussels, 2 April 2014

Janez Potočnik
European Commissioner for the Environment
European Commission
B-1049 Brussels, Belgium

Incineration Caps undermine Resource-Efficiency!

Dear Commissioner Potočnik,

ESWET is concerned about proposals that are being circulated to cap waste incineration. We would like to explain why this would undermine the resource-efficiency agenda you have defined throughout your mandate as Commissioner.

The association of European Suppliers of Waste to Energy Technology (ESWET) is well-placed to give an overview of waste management trends in many countries in Europe – and beyond.

Waste-to-Energy (WtE; plants incinerating waste, recovering the energy and making it useable e.g. as heat and/or electricity) is the technology recognised to maximise the use of the resource- and energy-contents of waste that was not selected by material recyclers. At the same time, emission limits on Waste-to-Energy plants are the strictest of any combustion industry, ensuring protection of the environment. Waste-to-Energy plants also contribute to fighting climate change by offsetting the use of fossil fuels and reducing landfilling.

This is reflected by the Waste Framework Directive's Waste Hierarchy and we are certain that you agree that incineration is preferable to landfilling.

Then why should we aim at curtailing incineration while a significant fraction of waste throughout the EU is still landfilled?

Capping incineration while landfilling continues will slow landfill diversion efforts

Why? Because the Landfill Directive restricts the landfilling of biodegradable Municipal Waste (MW), but allows landfilling of other residual waste suitable for incineration, such as plastics. This means that currently there is no EU cap or ban on landfilling of such waste. Once a plant/country would reach its incineration cap (e.g. in November, assuming the cap will be counted on a calendar year basis), the only alternative is to landfill the rest. Is this step backwards in the Waste Hierarchy something that DG Environment wants to incentivise?

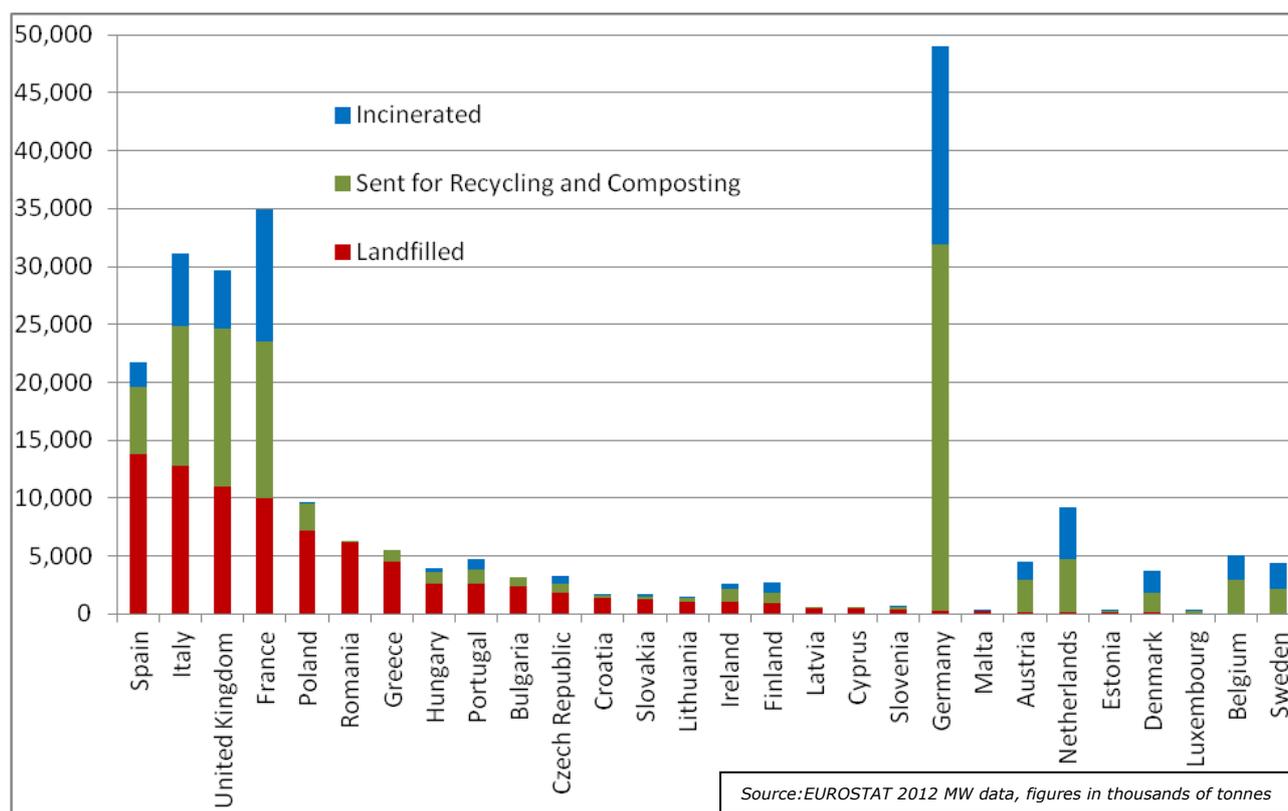
Residual Waste percentages are not as clear as absolute figures

It may sound logical to propose an ambitious target of e.g. 70% of Municipal Waste sent for recycling and to derive from it an incineration cap at e.g. 30%.

However it is important to underline the uncertainty associated with the Municipal Waste figures, and especially percentages, published by EUROSTAT. This office is dependent on data provided by Member States, which do not supply it in a homogeneous way. To begin with, not all Member States include the same waste streams in their MW figures, there are several ways to calculate the recycling rates, and it is unclear whether all Member States' data reflect the full extent of (possibly illegal) landfilling.

Even if data can be ascertained, what happens to unrecyclable waste when the incineration cap is reached and waste has not all been sent for recycling AND effectively recycled?

The reality is that the first method of residual waste treatment in Europe is still landfilling, and not just in Eastern Europe. The following graph is not the usual one: it reflects Municipal Waste Treatment in absolute quantities.



Before restricting the blue lines, we should first have gotten rid of the red ones!

It is clear that many countries still landfill a lot – not just in percentages – but also in absolute quantities. As we are aware that this will improve only slowly despite solutions being available, further tackling of landfilling should be the major priority of EU legislation, and not targeting incineration.

Our key message is: Unrecyclable waste will be unavoidable for the foreseeable future. Landfilling, though, is avoidable thanks to more recycling and WtE

This message, fully consistent with the Waste Hierarchy, is already applied in many EU Member States. In some countries, more recycling decreases the need for landfilling. In other countries, stricter application of the steps further up in the Hierarchy frees capacity in existing incinerators to help reduce landfilling in other countries (e.g. UK waste going to NL/SE). But the existing recycling and energy recovery capacity in the EU is not sufficient to eliminate landfilling.

Good recycling does not depend on an incineration cap

To maximise resource efficiency, the priority given to material recycling over energy recovery is already translated into a close-to-circular economy for some materials in many countries. There are extraordinary success stories with metal and glass recycling (in Belgium, 98% of container glass is collected for recycling according to FEVE), for instance, confirming the

relevance of the Waste Hierarchy and Resource-Efficiency initiatives set forth by the Commission.

There are other material streams which are much more challenging for material recyclers themselves. If recyclers cannot sustainably recycle the material, why should incineration be ruled out upfront? From a practical point of view, this will only lead to increased landfilling (and potentially illegal landfilling).

Enhanced risk of waste export for energy recovery hampers EU's industry

At ESWET, we are regularly contacted by public authorities and private companies in many parts of the world seeking European Waste-to-Energy technology, widely considered the most advanced, clean and cost-effective solution for unrecyclable waste. This cutting-edge export, which ESWET Members are continuously improving, is demanded by countries who want to follow the European example of moving away from landfilling. But no technology can be exported if it is not demonstrated at home, and hampering the use of incineration for unrecyclable waste, implicitly favouring landfilling, will not create conditions for further R&D of Waste-to-Energy technology. Would it really be smart for the management of European resources to limit incineration in the EU only to see such material exported (with associated transportation emissions) for treatment in third countries?

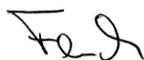
The way forward for waste management is first to minimise landfilling, an option which is already proven to be technically and economically feasible. The next step is improving recycling of challenging materials, plastic in particular, which does not depend upon a waste incineration ban (which the Plastic Industry itself recognises, c.f. our joint letter with PlasticsEurope¹) but on a variety of market- and technically-oriented measures.

Incineration caps do not change the unrecyclable nature of some waste

ESWET underlines the relevance of the Waste Hierarchy which gives a chance for waste to gain a positive value (resource) for society to recycle it instead of being a burden with a negative value (waste) that we all need to pay to get rid of.

Waste-to-Energy plants do not "buy clean recyclates" to keep on running: they get paid to incinerate waste because it is contaminated and/or has no value to recyclers. Limiting waste incineration does not make dirty waste cleaner: it will simply go to a landfill elsewhere. Does it make sense to limit Efficient Waste-to-Energy plants in relieving recyclers from their rejects if the side effect is exporting resource for combustion outside the EU or landfilling it elsewhere?

ESWET is prepared to collaborate with the EU Institutions and stakeholders to improve waste management in Europe but believes an incineration cap will mean continued landfilling, which goes against the very principle of resource-efficiency.



Edmund Fleck
ESWET President



Patrick Clerens
ESWET Secretary General

¹ Joint letter of 13.05.2013 calling for a landfill ban, available at: <http://www.eswet.eu/position-papers.html>