



MUNICIPAL WASTE EUROPE

– promoting public responsibility for waste

Brussels, 20/03/2012

POSITION PAPER ON PLASTIC CARRIER BAGS

Municipal Waste Europe is a non-profit association which represents European municipalities and their waste management companies, in their responsibility to manage municipal waste. The members of Municipal Waste Europe represent 14 Member States of the European Union, through national public waste associations, which serve over 60% and up to 95% of their national population.

One of the key issues for the European municipalities is the promotion of the responsibility of local and regional authorities for waste management as a service of general interest. Throughout Europe, municipalities are responsible for the recovery of material resources from European households. The members of Municipal Waste Europe therefore play a pivotal role in driving Europe to becoming more resource-efficient. In effect, the members of Municipal Waste Europe are the bridge between the actors in resource efficiency, the citizens and thus the public.

*** **

Further to the huge public response to the Commission consultation on methods to reduce the use of plastic carrier bags in May 2011, Municipal Waste Europe hereby puts forward its thoughts and experience in the matter.

Members of Municipal Waste Europe are faced with the daily challenge of collecting and treating the waste generated by its citizens, both that which ends up in waste or recycling bins, and that which becomes litter. Plastic carrier bags present a problem for several reasons, but tackling this issue specifically and separately will not, in Municipal Waste Europe's opinion, solve the greater overall problems caused by litter and plastic waste.

In this light, and in full knowledge of the environmental tragedy which is ongoing in the Pacific Ocean and other seas with the 'plastic soup', Municipal Waste Europe welcomes any European initiative which aims to reduce the problems of littering and to reduce or facilitate the recycling and recovery of plastic waste. In particular of plastics which have a short shelf-life, such as plastic packaging, and therefore create a burden for waste management.

There is a significant role here for producer responsibility, as there are many different types of plastic used for short-term packaging, many of which are difficult or costly to recycle, or cannot

be recycled at all. It is important that the discussion on prevention measures must also include the full internalisation of costs, having regard to the producer responsibility principle. Measures to prevent waste by reducing the types of plastic used in packaging, limiting these to plastics that are easy to recycle and which enable the new product to contain a majority of recycled content, would be welcomed by those who are responsible for reclaiming resources from waste in a sustainable way, thereby delivering resource-efficiency and making sure that such resources do not end their life in a landfill or in the ocean.

2006 estimates from the United Nations Environment Programme suggest that every square mile of ocean hosts 46,000 pieces of floating plastic.

According to UNESCO global production of plastics increased at an average of 9% per year rising from 1.5 million tonnes in 1950 to 245 million tonnes by 2008. Following a drop in 2009 the rate of plastic is once again picking up.

However, a single initiative on one specific product could have undesired effects, leading to inefficient measures and producing unpredictable results.

Municipal Waste Europe believes that the European legislator should provide clear, easy to implement, verifiable instructions to Member States and to producers on their responsibilities regarding controlling litter and ensuring that a maximum of waste can be recycled and recovered from the waste stream to become secondary raw materials. How each Member State achieves this goal is to be decided nationally and can be reported at European level, together with an indicator of the effectiveness of the chosen measure.

Biodegradable plastics

With regard to the issue of biodegradable plastics, Municipal Waste Europe would like to say the following:

The term ‘biodegradable plastic’ has become a cover-all, which includes plastics from plant origin (corn or potato principally) as well as the simply ‘degradable’ plastics which decompose over time but are made of fossil fuels with additional chemical compounds¹, toxic to the environment, which enable the plastic to decompose. Municipal Waste Europe is of the opinion that this lack of clarity must be addressed as it causes a great deal of confusion.

Apart from the questionable environmental footprint of biodegradable plastics, the appearance of biodegradable (plant origin) and degradable plastics (fossil fuel origin) in the waste stream causes problems both to plastic recycling and to composting. Plant-origin plastics decompose too slowly for the composting process and degradable plastics contaminate the compost. All types of decomposing plastics disturb the plastics recycling process, as it is not easy to differentiate between these and ‘normal’ plastics, therefore the quality of the secondary raw material is compromised.

¹ Environmental definitions and marketing labels have to be established, also including terms such as degradable, oxy-degradable, and biodegradable with organic or fossil origins.

The Joint Research Centre (JRC) is currently working on end-of-waste criteria for biodegradable waste to determine which input materials should be contained in biodegradable waste when it ceases to be waste. Their research does not include biodegradable plastics.

Trusting that our input will be useful to this debate, we remain,

Municipal Waste Europe

Contact: Secretary General, Ms. Vanya Veras.

Email: vanya.veras@municipalwasteeurope.eu, Telephone: 0032 2 229 2145