

Biowaste - Need for EU Legislation?

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Green paper on the management of bio-waste in the European Union.

The European economic and social Committee has not yet finished its work on this document but, after the first meeting of our study group on the subject, it is possible to stress some key subjects that are going to give the general orientation of our future opinion.

First of all, I want to state that the EESC welcomes the publication of this green paper which testifies to the interest of the European commission for the development of recycling or recovery of organic waste.

Probably the management of organic waste is an opportunity that was not paid by all the attention necessary until now, and whose development will contribute to a major share in achieving the 50% recycling target set by the Waste framework directive.

Even so organic recovery has many interesting advantages:

- it contributes to protect soil's agronomic value and to enhance food crops yields,
- it is operated with processes which controls health and environmental impacts by stabilising organic matter,
- it contributes to the fight against global warming through avoided emissions,
- it constitutes a key element in the waste management chain, complements prevention,
- it constitutes a key element in the waste management chain, complements prevention, re-use and recycling and is indispensable in achieving high recovery rates.

The main points stressed by the study group of the EESC are related to the scope of the green paper, the waste hierarchy, the biological treatments, the collection of waste, the final material and the right level of decision and management.

A) The scope of the green paper.

The EESC considers that the current scope is too narrow. It regrets that it is restricted to the bio-wastes and does not take into account biodegradable waste as a whole. In absence of a single regulation, the study group calls, at least, for a harmonized regulation in its principles and in its technical approaches.

B) The waste hierarchy.

Evidently enough, the EESC claims for the respect of the waste hierarchy. If reuse isn't relevant in the case, we think that prevention has to be reinforced, even if we know that it is a difficult matter that needs a strong commitment of the public, the consumers and producers. Recycling through composting has to be encouraged and specially in using anaerobic digestion. Recycling appears as the best way for the management of bio-waste diverted from landfill.

C) Biological treatments.

We think that it is better to stimulate the biological treatment rather than to force the other routes of treatment. We also think that we must let some liberty for the operators to innovate

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and to push up new technologies. Precise guide lines with recycling targets should probably be the most valuable way.

D) The collection of waste.

Separate collection may be considered the options that gathers the conditions for the best input material quality, and therefore for the compost produced. So when it is economically and technically feasible, that it isn't always the case, this option has to be recommended. Nevertheless, when separate collection is too difficult to manage, other solution as mixed waste collection may be possible if the quality of final compost is achieved, respecting scientifically established standards.

E) The final material.

A regulation framework or guide lines should focus on the quality of the final material (compost/digestate) more than on the technology used. The important matter is to obtain a compost of good quality, stable and sure, without sanitary risks. The best way is to define standards based on scientific risk assessment methodology.

F) The right level of decision and management.

The question of the need of an European legislation was asked. In fact, the treatment of the biodegradable waste depends also on the local conditions (geography, weather, use etc...). Consequently, the EESC has estimated that a strict and uniform European law is not really to be desired nor useful. We prefer an European framework or guide lines, with the definition of quality standards scientifically based, but managed on the local and national level.

To conclude, the EESC gives a strong approval to the Commission initiative but, in the same time, it stresses that the main issue is to produce a compost of high quality. To succeed we need clear standards but also to let the liberty to innovate to the managers and manufacturers. We have to concentrate on the quality of the final material more than on the technologies used to produce it.

The management of biodegradable waste allow to make interesting progress in the production of sustainable energy.