

HOUSE OF LORDS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE INQUIRY INTO WASTE REDUCTION

ENVIRONMENT AGENCY MEMORANDUM

1. INTRODUCTION

1.0 The Environment Agency is the Government's principal advisor on the environment. We regulate waste management activities and are also a principal delivery body for the Government's Waste Strategy 2007. We have a keen interest in waste reduction and resource efficiency as part of our role in protecting the environment.

2. RESPONSES TO THE COMMITTEE'S QUESTIONS

Better design and the use of materials

2.0 Clearly, manufacturing methods and designs that maximise resource efficiency will tend to reduce waste production. Similarly, the use of designs that facilitate the removal and recovery / recycling of materials, and the use of materials that are easily recovered / recycled will help to reduce the volume of wastes sent for disposal when products come to the end of their life.

2.1 We do not have the remit or technical expertise to comment in any detail about the role that better design or materials might play in the creation of waste. Although we are not the organisation to lead in this, we will be pleased to advise in any relevant field where we have expertise.

2.2 We are pleased to note that the Government plans to set up a new products and materials unit. This will identify and catalyse actions across the supply chain, to improve the environmental performance of products throughout their life cycle. The precise remit and membership of this unit is not yet clear. However, the Government's plan for the unit to produce a progress report on delivery by Spring 2008 is to be welcomed.

2.3 We would welcome clarity on responsibilities for driving and delivering the Government's waste reduction and resource efficiency programmes.

2.4 We believe that the wider use of life cycle assessment techniques in assessing alternatives should help to engender more sustainable product design.

Business framework

2.5 Our work with a number of industries on the development of Sector Plans has promoted sector improvement targets for environmental performance. These include waste reduction, as well as re-use, recycling and recovery.

- 2.6 The Sector Plans include many industries that are regulated under IPPC (Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control). IPPC places a statutory duty on industry to reduce waste and we are using our regulation of these companies to require them to reduce the amount of material used and the amount of waste produced or, where this represents the best available technique, to recycle more. We have set a target of a 15% reduction of waste disposal for these companies between 2006 and 2011.

Government policy

- 2.7 We support the Government's continued commitment to producer responsibility arrangements. It is right that businesses should be required to take financial responsibility for the environmental impact of products they place on the market. To date, these initiatives have focussed on increasing recycling rates for end-of-life products. In the decade that producer responsibility legislation has been in force for packaging in the UK, recovery rates have more than doubled. However, there has not been a reduction in the amount of packaging used or packaging waste discarded.
- 2.8 We expect that the future implementation of the Batteries Directive will reduce the proportion of batteries going to landfill, an outcome we welcome. However, the legislation is unlikely to have a significant impact on the number of batteries used. We would like to see Government come forward with proposals aimed at promoting viable environmentally preferable alternatives to batteries.
- 2.9 We believe that, wherever possible the primary purpose of producer responsibility schemes should be to reduce the amount of waste produced in the first place, not just to increase the amount of waste recycled.
- 2.10 We support the use of suitable financial incentives to encourage waste reduction. For instance, increased levels of landfill tax, combined with the relatively high cost of alternative waste management methods, is now beginning to provide a real incentive for businesses to reduce their waste production. Similarly, the recent reductions in the number of landfill sites through the implementation of the Landfill Directive, together with bans on the landfilling of certain wastes and requirements for pre-treatment for other wastes have increased the financial viability of waste reduction.
- 2.11 The Government's Waste Strategy for England 2007 sets out a number of objectives and targets to reduce waste production. It includes a high-level action plan to deliver these objectives.

3. WASTE QUALITY PROTOCOLS

- 3.1 Our work on waste protocols will be of interest to the Committee.
- 3.2 The BREW waste protocols project was launched in May 2006. It is a joint project between the Environment Agency, WRAP (Waste Resources Action Programme) and industry and is funded by Defra's Business Resource Efficiency & Waste programme.

- 3.3 The purpose of the protocols work is to either:
- Produce a quality protocol which sets out criteria on how to produce a product from a specific waste type or;
 - Produce a regulatory position statement or;
 - Agree a low risk position
- 3.4 So far the project has published:
- Compost Quality Protocol (15th March 2007)
 - Blast Furnace Slag Technical Report (24th August 2007). A Steel making by-product, Blast Furnace Slag (BFS), will no longer be classified as a waste, a move that will cut red-tape and allow the construction industry easier access to more than 3 million tonnes of the material produced annually.
 - Regulatory clarification statement for waste wood
- 3.5 The project is set to launch 12-week consultations for five Quality Protocols in the next two months. They are:
- The production of biodiesel from waste vegetable oil
 - Tyre-derived rubber materials,
 - Non-packaging plastics,
 - Flat glass,
 - Pulverised fuel ash.
- 3.6 The project is currently considering the following waste streams:
- Boiler ash from the disposal of paper sludge through combustion
 - Uncontaminated topsoil
 - Steel slag
 - Incinerator bottom ash
 - Waste plasterboard
 - Outputs from anaerobic digestate

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 The Environment Agency is keen to promote waste reduction as a business opportunity and not be seen as a regulatory burden. We want to play our part in changing attitudes towards waste and waste reduction in particular in accordance with our vision that waste will be reduced and have the smallest impact on the environment.

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