

# **Promoting the Sustainable Management of Biowaste across the EU: Bridging the Policy Gaps**

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## **Introduction**

Environmental protection and enhancement is at the heart of the European Union (EU). This underpins a broad range of EU policies and legal instruments, such as: The Göteborg Strategy (2001), which establishes a number of priorities for sustainable development; the European Climate Change Programme, which sets out strategies for the EU to reduce the release of greenhouse gases; the revised Common Agricultural Policy, which requires farmers to maintain farmland in good agronomic and environmental condition; the recently published Rural Development Strategy (2006), which aims to boost rural jobs and economic growth in line with the Lisbon Agenda, and finally; the Landfill Directive (EC/31/99), which sets progressive targets for member states to reduce the quantity of biodegradable municipal waste landfilled in order to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and promote recycling initiatives. As approximately 90% of the enlarged EU is rural in nature, biowaste management is inextricably linked to agricultural and soil management policies, and the EU's Rural Development Strategy.

The effective recycling of biowaste through composting or digestion can transform a potentially problematic 'waste' into a valuable 'product': compost. Compost can provide many benefits<sup>1</sup>, including: improving soil structure and increasing water retention, thereby preventing erosion and desertification; reducing soil organic matter losses; acting as a temporary carbon sink; improving soil buffering capacity and its ability to retain applied fertilisers, and; increasing biodiversity by boosting soil microbial populations and reducing horticultural reliance on peat.

The European Compost Network (ECN) believes that by composting and digesting biowastes, elements of all of these EU strategies can be achieved simultaneously. A policy vacuum currently exists, whereby lack of any specific legal instrument effectively prevents these opportunities from being realised. A regulatory 'catalyst' is therefore required to provide cohesion between these various EU strategies and exploit their synergies.

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<sup>1</sup> Organic Matter and Biodiversity. Van-Camp, L., Bujarrabal, B., Gentile, A-R., Jones, R.J.A., Montanarella, L., Olazabal, C. and Selvaradjou, S-K. (2004). Reports of the Technical Working Groups Established under the Thematic Strategy for Soil Protection. EUR 21319 EN/3, 872 pp. Office for Official Publications of the European Communities, Luxembourg.

## **Realising Biowastes' Potential**

Biowaste management needs to be carried out **effectively** in order to ensure that the environment and human health are protected. However, businesses, communities and municipalities need to operate and compete in a global market, where significant resource constraints exist. Biowaste management thus also needs to be **efficient** and **economic**.

The ECN believes that to achieve these '3Es' a two-pronged approach is required consisting of 'Regulatory Push' and 'Market Pull'.

### **Regulatory Push**

Developing new biowaste treatment infrastructure is time consuming and costly. Although it may be viewed by some as a small-scale 'cottage industry', it often requires complex, highly engineered systems costing in excess of €30 million that need to be operated by technically competent personnel. In many cases pay-back times can exceed 15 years. Many member states, particularly those that joined in 2004, need to develop significant infrastructure over the next five years to meet the EU Landfill Directive obligations. Without appropriate investment drivers and guidance, there is a real risk that targets will not be met and inappropriate treatment facilities built.

A framework enabling private companies and municipalities to invest in long-term strategies and build appropriate facilities is therefore urgently required. The ECN believes that establishing **binding targets for each member state** will:

- Create a critical mass, to realise resource efficiencies and create new investment opportunities within a reasonable time frame, and
- Reduce investment risks which assures the necessary funding by banks and investors

These targets should establish minimum composting / digestion levels for each member state, including provisions for the separate collection of clean feedstocks. Rather than be prescriptive in detail, each member state should be free to implement these targets in a manner that best reflects their socio-economic and demographic make-up. Such targets would be best established in a stand alone **Biowaste Directive**.

### **Market pull**

Composting and digestion are transformation processes converting a 'waste' into a valuable 'product'. Market forces apply to composts in the same way they do to other products. Like any product, consumers require assurances about product consistency, quality and safety. The sustainable use of bio-resources relies on the confidence of farmers, food retailers, professional users and the general public. In order to protect and enhance the environment (and prevent so-called 'eco-dumping'), products need to meet pre-defined quality criteria consistently, be tested independently using standardised analytical methods, and have auditable records kept throughout the manufacturing process.

The ECN believes that by implementing a **European-wide Quality Assurance Scheme** for separately collected organic feedstocks, safeguards to protect consumers and the environment will be established. Such schemes already exist in a number of member states (e.g. Germany, Hungary and the UK). These require facility operators to implement stringent quality assurance procedures, to send compost samples off to laboratories for testing on a frequent basis, and for their procedures and test results to be audited by an independent body. These schemes help compost producers sell their products into a range of markets, including agriculture, horticulture, landscaping and hobby gardening. Importantly, they help define when composts cease to be classed as a waste, thereby creating consumer confidence and emphasising product quality.

### **Biowaste Treatment Options**

Geographical and demographic characteristics inevitably mean that municipalities are required to adopt biowaste management strategies that meet local needs, reflecting the urban – rural composition. In many respects composting and digestion differ from other waste management processes in that it can be carried out at varying scales of size and complexity. It therefore enables regions to implement a range of different solutions: large and small-scale systems, a centralised or decentralised approach. There is no need to adopt a ‘one size fits all’ approach that characterises some alternative waste treatment or disposal methods.

These characteristics enable **integrated, flexible systems to be established** that can be adapted to local, regional and national conditions. Crucially it means that are responsive to future change. They can also bring together private companies, municipalities and individuals to work in partnership, to provide socially acceptable, competitive biowaste management solutions.

### **Conclusions**

The ECN believes that composting and digestion should be at the heart of European biowaste management strategies. It has a proven track record, as farmers have been composting for over 4,000 years. Biowaste is a resource that is too valuable to be lost through alternative disposal methods.

A potential ‘win-win’ situation currently exists, whereby composting and digestion can transform biowaste into a valuable product, meeting not only landfill diversion targets, but other key European policy initiatives. To bridge the current policy gap and realise these synergies action is urgently required by the Commission to develop a Biowaste Directive. Specifically this needs to set binding targets for member states to compost / digest a clean, separately collected proportion of their biowaste arisings, and establish a European-wide compost quality assurance scheme. Integrated, flexible systems can be established that will result in environmental protection, environmental enhancement, economic growth and job creation.