

CIRCULAR ECONOMY PACKAGE CONSULTATION EXPECTED 'BEFORE SUMMER'

EC Director-General for Environment Karl Falkenberg

The European Commission (EC) will launch the roadmap for its [revised Circular Economy Package](#) 'within the next few weeks', according to the EC's Director-General for Environment, Karl Falkenberg.

Speaking at a debate on how Europe can capitalise on the circular economy last Thursday (16 April), Falkenberg said that the package was still a 'work in progress' but that a roadmap will be released 'within the next few weeks', which will form the basis of a public consultation.

He said: "The commission is meeting in the coming weeks to see what we have as a basis for a wider consultation. When this is decided, we plan [to have] a wide stakeholder consultation before the summer break, so effectively we would be able to table a more ambitious and more effective proposal when everyone comes back from the summer break.

"We originally said we would table a new proposal by the end of the year, but it is now looking that something should be ready in the [autumn]."

Predictability of the industry and access to waste are 'key'

Although Falkenberg said it is "too early to give details because [the EC] is still making the package", he said that there are two elements that are key to the Circular Economy Package: predictability and access to waste.

He said: "Firstly, industry wants to make investments and seize opportunities but it needs a framework that provides the sometimes very expensive investments the necessary timeframe to amortise.

"Secondly, it is about access to waste. You can very effectively recycle... waste provided you have access to material – which will mean a key element is going to have to be separate collections and also ecodesign."

Quality over quantity

Touching on separate collections, Falkenberg said: “We have a lot in place already with collection systems, but we need to [ensure] that we are not just producing legislation, but that it is properly implemented.

“When separately collected, the material has value... We have [legislation in Europe that obliges member states to separately collect](#) the major waste streams – metals, plastics, paper, organic waste and glass – which is not the reality in most member states.”

Referring to the quality versus quantity debate, he said: “We should not fool ourselves with large numbers of recycling efforts when either the numbers are plainly wrong because they include pre-sorted materials, or because we are, effectively, downcycling. We need to get to high-quality recycling for the circular economy, and understand that it’s more important to get to these high-quality recyclates than just getting a big number. If a big number means we are just producing park benches from all of the plastic waste that we collect, European parks are going to be filled very, very rapidly, and no one will see the real benefits.”

Fellow panellist Gerben-Jan Gerbrandy MEP, the EC’s rapporteur on the Roadmap on Resource Efficiency, quantified some of these “real benefits”, stating: “EU businesses can save €600 billion [£431 billion] every year and create hundreds of thousands of jobs with the circular economy, and boost GDP with up to 3.9 per cent – these are figures that you hardly find in any other field so I think we would be stupid not to speed up the transition towards the circular economy.”

He added: “Most people still consider resource efficiency as environmental issue – but it’s not, it’s a due political issue, and of course an economic issue. It has such strong economic reasoning behind it that you almost get the environmental benefits for free.”

Country-specific targets

Although Falkenberg said it is “too early” to outline what waste and recycling targets will be included in the Circular Economy Package, he said “we need to have realistic targets” and “measure the success of our recycling efforts in a credible way”.

He seemed to back-up previous claims that the package may contain [country-specific, as well as EU-wide targets](#), saying: “We have a difficulty in regulating because we have laggards... We still have member states where the majority of municipal waste disappears into landfills, but we also have frontrunners which have basically zero untreated waste.”

However, Gerbrandy seemed to disagree with the withdrawal of EU targets, stating: “I have the feeling that the EC is already watering down its proposal... because of the big differences [across countries] they want to move away from setting European targets [but] we need to look at the enormous sense of urgency – geopolitically and economically – to move toward the circular economy. That means we have to be extremely ambitious, and – of course –realistic, but withdrawing high targets because they might not be realistic is not the right approach.”

Instead, Gerbrandy suggested that the EC use President Jean-Claude Juncker’s investment fund and other funds “to make high numbers of recycling also realistic”.

Reprocessor perspective

Speaking on behalf of the recycling and reprocessing industry, Andy Doran, Senior Manager for Sustainability and Recycling Development at aluminium company Novelis, agreed, saying: “The EU has 20 years of experience of what’s good in terms of collection and sorting technologies, and we have a very long tail of quite low performance – so to allow people to almost leapfrog bad practice, we should only give them funding if they are going to do something that is reasonably well tested, tried and replicable in their circumstances.”

Reflecting on Circular Economy Package targets, Doran said: “There are wider policies that would help support the growth of more businesses investing in Europe [to recycle] material, such as a longer-term vision on underpinning targets, and taxation costs on carbon and landfill. These all give industry the trajectory to know that that [investment] risk has gone. So, we [the recycling industry] would be looking very much for targets that would stretch and underpin the industry.”

He added: “Targets do underpin the movement of industry, but also they’re a totem for the consumer, so they have got to be meaningful targets so the consumer thinks that actually participating [in recycling] – putting a can, or plastic bottle in the system – is a meaningful

act, rather than thinking that 10 per cent of that might end up somewhere different [as is often the case once co-mingled material has been sorted].”

Other potential proposals

The three panellists all suggested that other recommendations could be incorporated into the new Circular Economy Package, which included:

- defining the concept of end of waste;
- encouraging (through legislative or other means) more countries to separately collect organic waste;
- extending the scope of the Ecodesign Directive, to focus on materials used, repairability, reusability, and recyclability;
- phasing out the use of pollutants and other harmful substances in products;
- encouraging businesses to drive materials up the waste hierarchy;
- creating a ‘Schengen’-style area for waste to allow more freedom of movement within the EU and utilise economies of scale;
- encouraging businesses and cities to share best practice on recycling and waste prevention; and
- taxing primary resources at a higher rate than secondary materials.

Find out more about the EC’s [Circular Economy Package](#)