

Schauvliege calls for sustainable materials management

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Flemish Minister for the Environment, Joke Schauvliege, introduced the theme of “sustainable materials management” at European level on behalf of the Belgian Presidency at an informal two-day Council meeting. During the informal Council meeting, the Environment Ministers from the 27 EU Member States focussed on the steps to be taken by the European Union to achieve a sustainable materials policy. This sustainable materials policy is to mark the start of “resource-efficient” and “materials-efficient” Europe, one of the key goals in the EU 2020 strategy.

During the informal Environment Council meeting in Ghent, Joke Schauvliege, chairing the Council on behalf of Belgium, launched practical policy proposals for a sustainable materials policy. She held indepth discussions with her ministerial colleagues, European Commissioner for the Environment Potočník and representatives of the European Parliament.

What is "sustainable materials management"?

‘Sustainable materials management’ covers the whole life cycle of products. This cycle starts with the reclamation or extraction of raw materials. These are then processed into semi-finished or finished products. These are marketed through distribution channels and bought by consumers, who use them and, sooner or later, discard them. The resultant waste can potentially be reused by being put back into circulation or recycled in a further application. A material ultimately returns to nature in another form or as a gas emission (after incineration). We call this the life cycle of a material.

There is no sense, for example, in putting in place an extensive infrastructure for waste collection and recycling if products are not made recyclable. There is also no point in putting recyclable products on the market if consumers make irresponsible use of them. There must be maximum cooperation between the different links in the chain to ensure a sustainable cycle economy. We refer to the development of such a policy as “sustainable materials management”.

Resource efficient

A “resource-efficient” or “materials-efficient” Europe is one of the key goals in the EU 2020 strategy. Materials efficiency is absolutely essential. Raw materials have become increasingly scarce as a result of strong development in growth economies and increased consumption, but the way in which we deal with materials (be they raw materials, products or waste) also lies at the heart of many environmental problems. In other words, efficient materials management will not only make our businesses more competitive and less dependent on imports from outside Europe, but will also ensure that we consume less energy (and therefore contribute less to global warming), create less light and water pollution, produce less waste, impinge less on precious agricultural land, cause less risk to health and put the ecosystem under less pressure.

Sustainable materials management means more than waste prevention and waste processing. Waste materials are no longer something to be disposed of with as little damage to the environment as possible. Waste materials are, first and foremost, symptoms of maladjusted manufacturing and consumption processes that we must change to ensure that there is as little residual waste as possible. And what is released from waste flows must be used as raw materials for other production processes. Or we must, at the very least, ensure that it contains no hazardous substances so that it can be returned to nature without causing problems. This cradle-to-cradle principle forms one of the pillars for sustainable materials management.

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