

# Towards a Circular Economy...or more running around in circles?

By Ainsley Fraser

So we know the height to which the EU has raised the bar for the waste industry – and we know by when we have to clear it...2030. That is not to say that we have loads of time, because a lot of the detail (you know, all the bits where the devil is!) will be introduced progressively in the meantime, indeed many of the processes are in place already.

The volume of documentation pouring from the European Commission's Directorate General for the Environment is of rain forest proportions, but as a starting point, go to [tinyurl.com/ydm7btm](http://tinyurl.com/ydm7btm) and follow some of the links. A lot of companies have already got people whose full time job it is to read, understand and implement the requirements – but if you haven't yet fully engaged, start now!

There is a lot to do and some of the targets – and the compliance and reporting regimes which go with them – are onerous. Will we get there? A cautious but confident 'yes'... and probably a lot better prepared and more fully compliant than many other member states. Really.

Actually, looking around, the UK waste industry is doing a pretty good job already. The key seems to be to think big, macro level, long term and start early – and there are some large scale projects happening now. Some of the most interesting developments are the refreshingly long term (twenty years and plus) 'partnerships' being established between large authorities and prime contractors. The business case is compelling – because the investment costs involved can be justified only by looking at the bigger long term picture. Of course, this also delegates – or at least shares some of the compliance responsibility with the 'prime provider'... probably good risk management too.

Certainly by 2030 – and in many cases well before, we will not think of, generate, process or dispose of waste in anything like the same ways that we do now. The ultimate vision is the creation of a 'Circular Economy' within the EU, [tinyurl.com/4l56yrg](http://tinyurl.com/4l56yrg) which means re-using, repairing, refurbishing and recycling existing materials and products. What used to be regarded as 'waste' can be turned into a resource.

As part of the Circular Economy package, the Commission has also adopted a legislative proposal to review recycling and other waste related targets in the EU. [tinyurl.com/ntryh5x](http://tinyurl.com/ntryh5x)

To better understand the future overall – and more importantly, plan and start what can be done now to prepare for it, take a look at some of the related 'parentage' stages and supporting documentation. Moving towards a Circular Economy is at the heart of the EU Resource Efficiency Agenda [tinyurl.com/o45ab6a](http://tinyurl.com/o45ab6a), established under the Europe 2020 Strategy [tinyurl.com/4l56yrg](http://tinyurl.com/4l56yrg) for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth. The main ideas on how to do more with less are taken further in the EU's Environment Action Programme to 2020 [tinyurl.com/pq2xdnd](http://tinyurl.com/pq2xdnd). Enjoy!

But new practices, compliance, monitoring and reporting will not be the exclusive domain of the larger authorities and their chosen providers – it covers all of us – including the smallest operators, starting now. Amongst the documentation there is a declared commitment to streamline and simplify the systems and processes for SMEs. It might cut down or eliminate some of the red tape, but it won't offer any exemptions.

The Commission states that, in 2010, total waste production in the EU amounted to 2.5 billion tonnes and that achieving the proposed waste targets would represent an overall savings potential of €630 billion per year for European

industry. It will do this whilst creating 180,000 new jobs, making Europe more competitive and reducing demand for costly, and scarce resources. Not sure who calculates the figures ... but some of the 'telephone number' statistics sound terrifyingly over ambitious.

The bottom line is that this affects all of us – and whilst we (the professional waste industry) have a pretty good idea of what is involved, the big challenge is educating the great general public out there to adopt a different mindset and think differently about waste and resources. There are some fantastic community outreach and schools programmes happening already, but we have to do more. The European Commission has recognised this educational challenge too and its 'Generation Awake' campaign [www.generationawake.eu/en](http://www.generationawake.eu/en) on resource efficiency focuses on what each one of us can do in our daily life to save water, energy and other natural resources and turn waste into a resource. Worth a look....

Of course, if we are to believe some of the current political rhetoric, it might be just worth remembering that the UK achieving fulfilment and compliance with all the 2030 objectives assumes that Britain will still be a member of the EU. But would such a development as withdrawal actually change much? Probably not. Having helped to create the mountain to climb, the regulatory and compliance framework to monitor and enforce it – and the bureaucracy to support it, the UK would be unlikely to unscramble or dismantle any part of it...so let's enjoy the bedtime reading, then wake up, smell the coffee and get on with it!



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In last month's issue, this magazine revealed a new programme of measures to help the UK establish a common approach to the circular economy