

European Commission adopts new circular economy action plan

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After years struggling to get the Commission on board, ECN welcomes recognition that *“high quality recycling relies on effective separate collection of waste”*. On the other hand, ECN warmly recommend the Commission to focus more on measures that effectively promote uptake of high-quality recycled compost in products to decouple growth from resource use.

Today the College of Commissioners of the European Union discussed and adopted the new [Circular Economy Action Plan](#) which should set a framework to reduce waste, deliver clean material loops, increase recycling capacity and get secondary raw materials market working, *inter alia*.

Although 14 Member States will not comply with the recycling target for 2020, bio-waste operators recovered 11.7 million tonnes of compost between 2016 and 2017, which roughly amount to 129 thousand tonnes of nitrogen (N), 42 thousand tonnes of phosphate (P) and **3.5 million tonnes of organic carbon**. Such figures could easily double, if uncompliant Member States achieved the European recycling targets.

Separate collection of bio-waste from households will become mandatory in 2023, following correct implementation of the provisions of the Revised Waste Framework Directive. ECN welcomes the proposal to *“harmonise separate waste collection systems, taking into account regional and local conditions”*, and stands ready to provide valuable know-how to improve every country’s separate collection capacity.

However, ECN regrets to acknowledge that the general approach to secondary raw materials is always marked by uncertainties and concerns with regards to their safety and quality. Certified compost is a high-quality, safe-to-use recycled material, that face challenges to compete with non-renewable mineral fertilising products due to price concerns and a lack of functioning markets, rather than to safety or quality issues.

“The action plan sadly is too vague about the future actions that will support the creation of a well-functioning internal market for secondary raw materials” says Dr Stefanie Siebert, Executive Director of the European Compost Network “the demand for recycled materials should be driven by harmonized legislation more effectively and a level playing field with raw materials should be established”.

As a matter of fact, recycled compost from separately collected bio-waste is an extremely valuable soil improver and nutrient supplier which is also rich in soil organic matter and its further use should be supported because it plays an important role in circular economy by closing the biological cycle. Adding compost to soil increases soil organic matter content which helps to

- Provide structure and hold onto water, which becomes very important expecting more and more dry summer periods in Central Europe due to climate change
- Provide a medium and nutrient source for plants and microbes and invertebrates to live; and
- Store more plant nutrients and more carbon as soil microbiological activity is enhanced and greenhouse gases are saved.

Providing that the composting process has been carried out effectively, a fraction of the organic carbon in the bio-waste is converted into stable humic substances (humus). Once applied to soil, this can then remain there for many decades, if not centuries. Applying compost to soil year-on-year can therefore not only improve a soil's functionality, but also sequester carbon.

The new circular economy action plan goes in the right direction by promoting and incentivising separate collection. However, in order to decouple growth from resource use, closing biological cycles is crucial. Returning composted bio-waste to soil at full scale should be pursued more effectively and the Commission should also work to ensure that harmonised legislation fairly drives the demand for recycled materials.

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