



EU-wide ban on landfilling non-pre-treated municipal waste would save millions of tons of methane emissions

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Ecopreneur.eu, the European Sustainable Business Federation, calls on the European Commission to pursue a general ban on landfill more ambitiously, also in view of the methane pledge at COP26 and the overall target of climate neutrality by 2050.

At COP26, more than 100 countries committed to reducing methane emissions - a commitment that could prevent 0.2 degrees Celsius of global warming. They agreed that we cannot meet the goal from the Paris agreement without addressing the **methane problem coming from fossil fuel production, agriculture and landfills**. When measured over two decades during which methane is active as a greenhouse gas, it is up to 84 times more harmful to the climate compared to CO₂, which lingers in the air for centuries. That means **reducing methane now can have a relatively swift effect on global temperatures**. In the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, "Cutting back on methane emissions is one of the most effective things we can do to reduce near-term global warming ... it is the lowest-hanging fruit."

Also in Europe, methane gas emissions from landfills dominate the emissions from waste treatment. Measures to reduce these emissions can easily be implemented. In Germany, for example, a number of regulations have resulted in a steady decline in the amount of municipal waste landfilled since the 1990s. In 2005, a ban on the landfilling of non-pre-treated organically degradable municipal waste was introduced. Since then, the industry's greenhouse gas emissions have decreased by over 25 million tons of CO₂ equivalents per year compared to 1990, mostly due to the landfill ban.

The potential for methane emission reduction is far from being exploited in the EU: in 2019, 13 of the 27 EU member states still landfilled more than 40 percent of their municipal waste. Overall, almost 25 percent of municipal waste in the EU was disposed of in landfills. From this perspective, alternatives to landfilling hold an enormous potential for reducing greenhouse gas emissions in a relatively easy and inexpensive way. The new target of the Waste Framework Directive, according to which **only 10 percent of municipal waste may be landfilled by 2030**, therefore is a step in the right direction.

However, this target is **not far-reaching enough for an ambitious implementation of the Green Deal**. For one thing must always be borne in mind: every ton of waste landfilled today will continue to generate greenhouse gas emissions for years to come. In addition to Germany, countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Belgium show that a landfill rate



of almost zero is possible. Across the EU, this would save millions of tons of CO₂ annually.

At the same time, most of these countries have shifted their waste treatment from landfill to incineration instead of genuine recycling. This is due to the presence of waste that cannot be recycled in an economically and ecologically viable way. For this type of waste, incineration with energy recovery is currently the best available and only viable option, as it not only avoids emissions from landfilling but also generates energy and heat that can be used by consumers and industry. In comparison, chemical recycling technologies currently require far too much input from fossil energy sources. Over time, **waste volumes will decrease** substantially by **circular economy models**, **separation methods** will improve, **chemical recycling** technologies might evolve further, and **renewable energy** will be generated in sufficient quantities to process these waste fractions in a sustainable manner. Until then, **incineration with energy recovery will be slowly phased out** as the last option for waste that cannot be prevented or recycled in any economically and ecologically reasonable way – except for a few specific waste fractions that may be safely stored until they can be properly processed later.

However, we would like to emphasise that **an EU-wide landfilling ban must not lead to the incineration of recyclable waste fractions**. Lock-in effects and the creation of additional incineration capacity should be prevented by mandating EU member states to adapt their fee structure for waste treatment in line with the EU waste hierarchy, with fees for incineration exceeding those for mechanical recycling. Moreover, **waste must be avoided by mainstreaming circular design and business models** (reduce, reuse etc.).

In summary, the European Sustainable Business Federation points out that, if implemented properly, an EU-wide ban on the landfilling of non-pre-treated municipal waste by 2030 would have a clear steering effect towards more recycling and would thus be a significant driver of a climate-friendly circular economy. **A general ban on landfill should therefore be pursued more ambitiously**, also in view of the methane pledge at COP26 and the overall target of climate neutrality by 2050.

ABOUT ECOPRENEUR.EU – THE EUROPEAN BUSINESS FEDERATION

Ecopreneur.eu is the European Sustainable Business Federation of currently seven national associations representing about 3000 sustainable companies - mostly SMEs. We show best practice examples, bring concrete experience from our companies into the political debate and represent their needs. Ecopreneur.eu is the only cross-sectoral EU business organisation advocating ambitious measures, rules and regulations to create a new framework for a sustainable economy.

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