Food waste collections and the unintended consequences of plastic contamination

22 September 2020, 13:00 – 14:30 CEST

Online event

Webinar hosted by MEP Franc Bogovič

Co-Chair of the Bioeconomy Working Group of the
European Parliament Intergroup on 'Climate Change, Biodiversity & Sustainable Development'

Speakers:

- **MEP Franc Bogovič**
- **David Newman,** Managing Director, BBIA
- **Marco Ricci-Jürgensen,** Chair, Working Group on Biowaste, International Solid Waste Association, & Senior Expert Italian Composting and Biogas Association
- **Mattia Pellegrini,** Head of Unit "Waste Management & Secondary Materials", DG Environment, European Commission
- **Liliana Nichita,** Director, Federation of Intercommunity Development Associations, Romania
- **Harmen Dekker,** Managing Director, European Biogas Association

Welcome Remarks

MEP Franc Bogovič

> "***We must move from the mindset of waste being a problem, to see waste as being a resource."***

First of all, MEP Mr. Bogovič stated the **prominence of the EU Circular Economy Package adopted in 2018,** focusing on the sustainability and the circularity of the European industry, national administration and consumer's habits. Mr. Bogovič also highlighted its impact on waste management, underlining notably the ambitious EU targets, the broadened legal scope and the strengthened requirements regarding waste selection. Then, Mr. Bogovič depicted the **issue of food waste as a critical world problem**, **with numerous and various negative externalities on the environment**. The necessity to move the mindset from **"waste being a problem, to waste being a resource"** was then underlined. According to Mr. Bogovič, the additional EU Circular Economy Action Plan and Farm-to-Fork strategies provide important lever for actions regarding alternative and more eco-friendly routes for waste management. **The growth in circularity will also require a holistic approach at every stage of the life cycle** in order to foster products' recovery, but also **high synergies between industries and public administration in term of waste collection**. Moreover, Mr. Bogovič argued that such an issue, including recycling and re-use, needs **fostered citizens' participation**. The case of Slovenia, as a potential inspiration for other Member States, was then addressed. Indeed, Mr. Bogovič's home country is one of the most efficient EU country regarding waste management, at a municipal as well as at the national level. This Member State is way ahead of EU targets on those issues and can therefore be used as an example for its European counterparts, according to Mr. Bogovič.

Panel Discussion

David Newman, Managing Director, BBIA

> ***"Three pivotal measures are needed to tackle the issue of food waste collection and plastic contamination: adoption of an EU Regulation similar to Italy's legal framework, which will ban non-compostable plastics in biowaste collections, revision of the Fertilizer Directive, in order to reduce input contamination permitted for the production of organic fertilizers, and revision of the Fertilizer Directive before 2023 regarding outputs to soil."***

Mr. David Newman started his intervention by stressing that food waste collection is a challenge for the EU, due to the huge amount of food waste that is incinerated or landfilled annually. However, Mr. Newman underlined that it is at the same time an opportunity, because **treating food waste can reduce greenhouse**

gas emissions, produce renewable energy, return nutrients to soil and restore the soil, through the generation of biogas, biomethane, compost and organic carbon. Mr. Newman also highlighted that only **16% of biowaste is collected separately in EU**, while through proper initiatives this number could be multiplied five times, reaching 85%. Moreover Mr. Newman pointed out that **Italy amounts for about two thirds of the food waste collected in EU** and provided further information regarding Italy's successful food waste policy. More specifically **Italy's food waste has a very low plastic contamination rate of only 1.5%,** because food waste has to be collected either with reusable containers or with compostable bags. The cost of extracting this plastic from the feedstock in Italy is about 100 million euros annually, which means that if EU achieves Italy's low contamination rate of 1.5%, the cost of plastic extraction will be about 900 million euros annually. Mr. Newman explained that this scenario is a best-case scenario, since the contractual obligation of **biowaste treatment plants in many EU countries is achieving a 5% contamination rate**, which implies that the cost of plastic extraction in the whole EU would be about 2-2.5 billion euros annually. Mr. Newman argued that **even the best-case scenario is an economical disaster for the anaerobic digestion and composting industries and for the EU citizens**, that will be burdened with the cost of plastic extraction. In that line, Mr. Newman argued that the aforementioned data indicates that the plastic industry is transferring its waste to the biowaste industry free of charge and the Single Use Plastics Directive ignores the largest, unnoticed disposal of plastic waste in the EU – into biowaste treatment. Moreover, Mr. Newman added that plastic contamination of food waste also results in environmental problems, since it leads to plastic contamination of soil. Mr. Newman concluded his intervention by suggesting three pivotal measures to tackle the issue of food waste collection and plastic contamination: **adoption of an EU Regulation similar to Italy's legal framework**, which will ban non compostable plastics in biowaste collections, **revision of the Fertilizer Directive**, in order to reduce input contamination permitted for the production of organic fertilizers and **revision of the Fertilizer Directive before 2023** regarding outputs to soil.

Marco Ricci-Jürgensen, Chair, Working Group on Biowaste, International Solid Waste Association, & Senior Expert Italian Composting and Biogas Association

"Prevention of plastic contamination of the feedstock is key in order to ensure the quality of the output (compost or digestate) and in that direction compostable bags are a proven useful tool."

Mr. Marco Ricci-Jürgensen provided further information on Italy's successful food waste collection and treatment. Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen underlined that the Italian Composting and Biogas Association has been involved for almost 30 years in promoting an efficient and economically sustainable food waste collection. One of Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen's key messages was that the quality of the feedstock is of utmost importance and in that direction, **households play a pivotal role**. More specifically Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen argued that **households need to be equipped with certified compostable or paper bags**. This would ensure that the bags do not become a disturbing factor for anaerobic digestion and composting plants, while at the same time studies show that participation in food waste collection and quantities would be enhanced.

Furthermore, Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen underlined that **minimization of plastic contamination in food waste can be achieved through a combination of technological advancements and cooperation between all the actors of the recycling sector**, so to avoid that impurities and rejects become a burden for recycling plants; currently CIC estimates that the disturbing factor of conventional plastics in food waste would imply **increased cost for facilities** (about 100 million euros annually) and **loss of end product** (compost or biogas). Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen concluded his intervention by reiterating that prevention of plastic contamination of the feedstock is key in order to ensure the quality of the output (compost or digestate) and in that direction compostable bags are a proven useful tool, since they do disintegrate in industrial composting.

Mattia Pellegrini, Head of Unit "Waste Management & Secondary Materials", DG Environment, European Commission

"Within the scope of the CEAP (Circular Economy Action Plan) waste laws will be modernized, EPR (extended producer responsibility) schemes will be enhanced and harmonization of separate waste collection systems will be proposed."

Mr. Mattia Pellegrini started his intervention by highlighting that one of the main focus areas of the European Commission within the European Green Deal is circular economy. Mr. Pellegrini further mentioned that on the 11th of March 2020 **CEAP (Circular Economy Action Plan) was adopted**, which among others **addresses key product value chains, including food, and waste prevention**. Within the scope of the CEAP **waste laws will be modernized**, **EPR (extended producer responsibility) schemes will be enhanced and harmonization of separate waste collection systems will be proposed.** Additionally, Mr. Pellegrini underlined that the 2018 waste package has already set ambitious targets, like **65% recycling and 10% landfilling of municipal waste by 2035**, **70% recycling of packaging waste by 2030, adoption of waste prevention measures and phasing out landfill of all recoverable waste**. Furthermore Mr. Pellegrini mentioned several important provisions of the new Waste Framework Directive adopted in 2018 as regards biowaste, including:

- **reducing food waste by half by 2030,**
- obliging Member States to measure and report on food waste generation annually starting in 2020,
- mandating the European Commission to propose a binding food waste reduction target by the end of 2023,
- obliging **Member States to collect biowaste separately** or ensure recycling at source by the end of 2023 and to ensure it is not incinerated,
- counting municipal biowaste entering aerobic or anaerobic treatment as recycled only if it has been separately collected or separated at source, starting on 1st of January 2027.

Mr. Pellegrini also underlined that by 31st of December 2024 the European Commission has to consider setting separate recycling targets for municipal biowaste, highlighting at the same time that this would be

complex, due to the variation of separate biowaste collection rates among EU Member States. Furthermore, Mr. Pellegrini noted that according to the Waste Framework Directive, Member States may only allow waste with similar biodegradability and compostability properties to be collected together with biowaste, which means a contrario, that non-compostable and non-biodegradable bags can not be included in the feedstock of waste treatment facilities. Finally, Mr. Pellegrini highlighted that the European Commission is working towards a Proposal for harmonizing separate waste collection systems in 2022 and facilitating consumer involvement.

Liliana Nichita, Director, Federation of Intercommunity Development Associations, Romania

> ***"All these economic instruments together (landfill tax, circular economy contribution, …) succeeded in moving local politicians to do something for waste management".***

First of all, Ms. Nichita provided some information on the Romanian case regarding biowaste. With half of its population living in rural areas (large use of home compost), **Romania is a Member State that produces the least amount of biowaste per habitant in the EU**. Nevertheless, this country also presents important failures, especially regarding municipal waste landfilling and separate waste collection. Then, Ms. Nichita explained that a new "compost" law will be enforced soon. The latter notably includes **mandatory separate collection, enlightened role of local authorities on this issue, or conformity certification of waste send to composting or anaerobic digestion**. The issue of biowaste management is also addressed by Ms. Nichita, stating that the current capacity of treatment concerns only 10% of the total quantity produced, but that it will be increased in the following years. Additionally, Ms. Nichita presented several already **operating economic instruments used to improve biowaste management (landfill tax, circular economy contribution, etc.)**. According to Ms. Nichita, those instruments somehow succeeded **in boosting local authorities' involvement on the issue of waste management.** Finally, Ms. Nichita underlined the fact that, even if Romania was not able to achieve significant results toward waste management in the past, the current route is very promising.

Harmen Dekker, Managing Director, European Biogas Association

> "***We are seen actually by those surrounding us, as being bad because we are handling waste, although we are trying to solve a problem".***

Mr. Dekker started his speech by informing that the **biogas industry** was in fact, as big as the wind or the solar industry, but is not equally recognized due to its very **localized and decentralized involvement**. Then, using Dutch and Norwegian examples, Mr. Dekker showed how biogas installations based on food/organic waste are working. Moreover, the current and potential use of biowaste within the biogas industry was also addressed. Currently**, 12% of the biogas feedstock distribution is made of organic food waste**, while Mr. Dekker explained that there is a **huge potential to increase this percentage**. However, Mr. Dekker underlined that within organic fractions, one of the l**arge problems is the plastic waste which is very difficult and costly to remove**. Such an issue is problematic since the renewable energy produced by the biogas industry becomes expensive, whilst polluter does not feel the burden. Finally, Mr. Dekker suggested several solutions to this problem, mainly based around the **"polluter-pays principle"**. For instance, there is a need for the packaging industry to share the burden of removing the plastic from organic waste. Moreover, Mr. Dekker claimed that the **renewable gas industry should be paid for plastic separation in order that the cost of renewable gas is not negatively influenced.** The necessity for best practices sharing and implementation regarding plastic separation was also re-asserted. Finally, Mr. Dekker argued that the biogas industry is a cornerstone for the "defossilization" of energy production in Europe and that it is ready to contribute to this challenge.

Discussion with the audience, moderated by David Newman, Managing Director, BBIA

The first question came from **Mr. Bogovič** who, based on his experiences in Slovenia, was wondering if there was some kind of **youth involvement in Romania** regarding the process of waste management. **Ms. Nichita** answered that children and students are very important to give the message to the population and that there were educational programs and communication campaigns organized to foster youth involvement on recycling or separate collection. Secondly, **Mr. Newman** asked directly to **Mr. Pellegrini** what the biogas and the composting industry can do to collaborate with the Commission to make sure that this issue is sorted out. In his answer, Mr. Pellegrini first saluted the fact that **many Member States (such as Romania or Italy) are anticipating new EU targets and are already going a step further**. Then, he highlighted the need for the industry to share best practices but also to gather as much data as possible, in various domains linked to biowaste. The third question addressed the **circularity gap between soil, food and biowaste**, and how can this gap be closed. **Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen** reacted to this question by, first, explaining the need to recognize the important hidden value of digestate and compost. Secondly, Mr. Ricci-Jürgensen also stressed the importance to link the biowaste strategy to the soil strategy.

Closing remarks

MEP Franc Bogovič

Within his concluding remarks Mr. Bogovic highlighted that there are **big differences in waste management between Member States** and it is **necessary to close this gap** and provide cohesion funds to Member States in need. Mr. Bogovic also reiterated that the **quality of the feedstock must be improved through the use of biodegradable plastic**. Last but not least, Mr. Bogovic underlined that the **EU has a very ambitious legislation and policy package**, including the **EU Green Deal,** the **CEAP**, the **Farm to Fork Strategy** and the **Waste Package** and it is time to implement the solutions that have already been identified.

Harmen Dekker, Managing Director, European Biogas Association

Before concluding the event, Mr. Dekker also took the floor to stress the importance of the webinar's discussions, highlighting that biowaste constitutes 34% of the municipal waste in EU and therefore the composting and biogas industry can play an important role in closing the circularity gap and helping local communities become environmentally friendly and sustainable.