

Burning policy puts pressure on recycling targets

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A boom in incinerator-building could make it impossible for the UK to meet future targets for recycling, a report says.

The consultancy Eunomia says waste companies constructing new incinerators will need waste to feed them.

And that could reduce Britain's stated ambition to recycle more waste.

A government spokesman said "great progress" had been made in boosting recycling rates.

But Eunomia's report says current trends in building incinerators will make a mockery of the ambition of Environment Secretary Michael Gove to achieve a "green Brexit".

Recycling success

Since 2009/10, it says, the UK has more than doubled its capacity for burning what is known as residual waste – what is left over after recycling.

Capacity to burn it has risen from 6.3 million tonnes to 13.5 million tonnes.

But over the same period, the quantity of residual waste has fallen from an estimated 30 million tonnes per annum to 26 million.



That is because of increased recycling coupled with a reduction in commercial waste as firms strive to be more environmentally responsible.

That means the UK is building more incinerators which will be chasing a shrinking mountain of waste.

Eunomia says this flies in the face of the ambition to achieve a "circular economy" – re-using or recycling as much waste as possible. It says the UK is expected to retain this EU objective even after Brexit.

It points out that the government is currently developing its draft industrial strategy from January 2017.

That aims to "secure the economic benefits of the transition to a low-carbon and resource-efficient economy".

Eunomia's Dominic Hogg accused the government of withdrawing from waste and resources policy over the last seven years.

This has led, he says, to the rate of improvement in recycling slowing down, and then going into reverse in England.

Mr Hogg said: "The most significant changes in recent years have been the switch from landfilling of waste to incinerating it. This reflects a complete absence of ambition, and gives rise to costs that are not justified by the benefits."

"Are we leaving the EU so that we can regain the tag of 'the dirty man of Europe?'"

He pointed out that it used to appear environmentally beneficial to burn waste rather than coal. But now the UK's energy stock is cleaner, incineration looks an increasingly dirty option.

A Defra spokesperson said: "We have made great progress in boosting recycling rates. This includes the proportion of household waste being recycled increasing from 11% to 44% between 2000 and 2015."

"We recognise the need for a mix of infrastructure and this will form part of a renewed strategy on waste and resources that looks ahead to opportunities outside the EU."

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