

Trade, China and Plastics meet at the EU Circular Economy Event

It's rarely enough to sit in the office and read policy papers if you want to comprehend what's hottest on the policy agenda in Brussels. Two days spent at the EU Circular Economy Stakeholder Event on 20-21 February gave us not only an opportunity to take the temperature but also offered a chance to present some of our own work. There was high-level endorsement of the Circular Economy theme, not just from Commissioner Vella but also from two Vice Presidents including Frans Timmermans.

But this was high-level endorsement with a difference. After saying the necessary words of endorsement, Frans Timmermans didn't just stay in the auditorium of 700 delegates to listen to the debate: he stayed on to ask a question: "What should I include from the circular economy on my agenda with Chinese officials?" And he picked up on the answer: Remanufacturing, on the grounds that Chinese economic plans continue to promote it.

A forthcoming visit to Hejian by the [European Remanufacturing Council](#) and others promises to further develop the Sino-EU links on the subject.



Trade Policy

The authentic high-level endorsement helped to steer the debate away from a potentially explosive issue; how to protect the European Circular Economy from cheap, single-use, disposable products - most imported from low-cost south-east Asian economies. For now, the issue emerges only indirectly in discussions about controlling product obsolescence or implementing extended producer responsibility measures. The inclusion of the Circular Economy in high-level trade talks with China is evidence enough that the Commission is alert to the risks the theme poses for wealth creation in the wider European economy.



Plastics Everywhere

And whilst Free Trade was an underlying theme, plastic was everywhere. Karl-H. Foerster of Plastics Europe was perhaps the star turn on Day 1 as he succeeded in presenting the [Plastics 2030 - Voluntary Commitment](#) as a radical response from industry. Had 'Blue Planet' or the Ellen MacArthur Foundation's 'New Plastics Economy' work not been such a catalyst for public opinion, one suspects the title might have included '...2050'. But Karl-H. Foerster aside, the discussion of plastic contamination of the marine environment offered an opportunity for the Commission to shine. The much-delayed [Plastics Strategy](#) is a clever fusion of traditional waste regulation and Circular Economy framing. Its publication was so well timed that no one could deny that some self-congratulation was in order.



Divergent Member States

The success of the Commission in bringing unity of purpose to the Member States on plastic wastes was much less evident in the circular economy more generally. The ambition of the French, Dutch and Scandinavian governments was much in evidence. Together, these 'circular leaders' have grasped a deeper meaning in the Circular Economy concept and now seek to gain competitive advantages by moving first. They aspire to become home to organisations adopting new business models, products and services. By contrast, several other Member States are still struggling to implement existing wastes management regulations and aspire only to meet recycling and landfill diversion targets. For these Member States, 'circular economy' is merely a new term for wastes management and recycling.

The gap between those who see Circular Economy in industrial development terms and those who see it merely as new vocabulary is widening. How the Commission will bring unity of purpose to the Circular Economy was best hinted at with a clever paper in relation to the all-important product policy framework. Carsten Wachholz of the EEB put forward a paper^[1] that is likely to be more influential than its bland formatting suggests.

Conclusion

For a demonstration of how a civil service can deliver progress whilst absorbing the tensions and dilemmas created by lobbyists from across the spectrum – including from perfectionists and cynics – there is much to admire here in Brussels. Circular Economy policy is not quite what it might seem. It is not yet an embedded element in a future European Industrial Strategy nor is it limited to end-of-pipe wastes management considerations.

French leadership, supported by the ever-pragmatic Dutch, is likely to drive further progress. But watch out for how this agenda plays out in International Trade.

by David Fitzsimons, Director of the Conseil Européen de Remanufacture

References:

1. Briefing on the EU Product Policy Framework, available from <http://eeb.org/work-areas/resource-efficiency/product-policy/>

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About the Conseil Européen de Remanufacture:

The vision of the European Remanufacturing Council is to triple the value of Europe's remanufacturing sector to €100 billion by 2030. We will bring together businesses from every product sector to share knowledge, and seek changes to policy with the aim of making remanufacturing a normal part of the product life cycle.



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About Oakdene Hollins:

Oakdene Hollins is a research and consulting business that advises clients on the circular economy and product stewardship. From offices in the UK and Brussels we provide market research and science-based evidence for Government and business clients. The company manages a European knowledge centre on remanufacturing (see www.remanufacturing.org.uk and www.remanufacturing.eu) and has established a new European Council for Remanufacturing based in Brussels (see www.remancouncil.eu). Oakdene Hollins also manages the award of the European Ecolabel within the UK to companies applying to sell their products within the European single market (see www.eu-ecolabel.uk).

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