

Landfills a thing of the past in Germany where advanced waste management rules

By Evridiki Bersi - Kathimerini

Imagine that there was a ban on disposing of garbage in landfills. It may sound impossible but that day has already come in Germany. On June 1, 2005, Germany imposed a ban on traditional garbage dumps, replacing them with one of the most advanced waste-management systems in the world.

In the 1970s, Germany had around 50,000 landfills. Now, in a country of 83 million inhabitants, there are less than 300 and they don't take unsorted garbage. They only accept what is left after recyclable items have been removed and the rest has been subjected to various processes that compress it into an inert mass. In 2020, those landfills will be out of operation because by then Germany plans to make use of all garbage and the energy produced by it.

The ecological and town-planning issues that led to such a decision are familiar in Greece: pollution of the soil and the water table, emission of toxic gases, protests by local communities. What we are not familiar with is the economic benefits that total waste processing offers.

“As long as the prices of raw materials and energy keep rising, the greater the importance of total waste processing,” said Stephan Harmening, president of the Federation of the German Waste Management Industry, in his opening speech at the Entsorga-Enteco 2006 exhibition, which presented the latest waste technologies.

In the early days of recycling, the cost of recycled materials exceeded that of newly manufactured materials. But as the demand for raw materials increases dramatically, their cost rises worldwide. The gap between the cost of new and recycled materials is narrowing, with the latter sometimes even being cheaper.

Harmening cited the example of PET, a plastic made from recycled bottles which costs 1,000 euros per metric ton, while new plastic of the same quality costs 1,200 euros per metric ton.

The German Business Institute (IW) estimates that Germany saves 3.7 billion euros a year thanks to recycling and the production of energy from waste.

Proper waste processing saves the German economy 20 percent of the cost of metals and 3 percent of the cost of energy imports.

“Three percent doesn't sound like much, but it does when you think that it is 3 percent of total German energy imports,” Harmening noted.

Latest technology

Advanced waste-processing systems naturally demand far more investment than conventional dumps, but total waste management makes sense in economic terms as well as environmental terms. In Germany, however, there is another economic dimension: Berlin sees waste management as a boom industry of the future and is

implementing an innovative waste-management policy so as to give its local enterprises in the sector a head start. As a result, the 55,000 old garbage dumps have been replaced by 70 incinerators, 60 biological and mechanical waste-processing factories, and 800 units producing compost from organic waste.

Meanwhile, the volume of raw materials arriving at recycling factories keeps growing. Ninety percent of every bottle made in Germany is made of recycled glass, eight out of 10 pages in every book and newspaper are from recycled paper, as well as 90 percent of most packaging; while 100 percent of car batteries and oils are recycled.

Other European countries have made progress with recycling. Last year, Europe overall recycled 34 percent of waste, up 10 percent since 1997.

Where Germany and all the industrialized world has failed is in reducing the total volume of waste, which is growing in line with the economic developments of each country. If governments want to reduce the pressure on dumps, they will have to adopt advanced waste-management systems.

“For me it’s a matter of time,” said Harmening, “till we open up the old landfills and use the raw materials in them. I believe that in 50 years time, the way we manage our trash today will be seen as a waste.”