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Waste incineration and waste prevention are not a contradiction in terms

New Federal Environment Agency background paper

Waste incineration does not oppose waste prevention, states the conclusion of a new background paper issued by the Federal Environment Agency (UBA). "The prevention principle continues to take priority over recycling and disposal of waste", said UBA President Prof. Dr. Andreas Troge. "Thermic valorisation of waste, however, is an unavoidable chapter in sustainable waste management. Waste incineration plants play an important role in climate protection and saving natural resources". These were the findings of tests carried out by UBA and various environmental research institutes.

As waste is indeed incurred in our consumer society, thermal valorisation of waste which is not otherwise redeemable will also continue to be necessary and useful. A comparison across Europe shows that countries with progressive waste management systems in place have both a high proportion of waste incineration as well as high rates of materials recycling, as for example in Denmark and the Netherlands, where waste incineration does not impede high rates of recycling.

Waste incineration is an ecological means of waste disposal when waste is not otherwise redeemable. The energy generated at waste incineration plants could replace fossil fuels such as coal or oil, saving about 9.75 million tonnes carbon dioxide (CO₂) in Germany annually. Total relief in terms of avoided carbon dioxide emissions, because of fossil fuel share in waste¹ and foreign energy supply, comes to about 4 million tonnes, an amount which corresponds to the annual CO₂ emissions of roughly 1.6 million passenger cars.

It continues to be of prime importance, however, to avoid waste as much as possible, and this requires greater materials efficiency in manufacturing. The less material is required in production, the less waste is produced. A change in consumer thinking is also required: there is a number of ways to make more intensive use of goods and services and thus avoid waste. Examples include renting machines that are rarely used instead of purchasing, repairing the defective dishwasher rather than buying a new one, or acquiring refurbished furniture or computers instead of buying them new.

¹ The energy content of residual waste from human settlements is about 50 percent biogenic content, which can be classed as carbon dioxide-neutral.

The background paper (in German) titled *Abfallverbrennung ist kein Gegner der Abfallvermeidung [Waste incineration and waste prevention not a contradiction in terms]* takes stock of the current situation and argues 10 standpoints. It is available for download at <http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-presse/hintergrund/chronologisch.htm>.

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