



environmental
services
association

Anti-EfW campaigners' call for waste sector carbon law is misinformed and misleading

Press Release - 16 November 2020

Statement issued by the Environmental Services Association (ESA)

The Environmental Services Association (ESA) believes that an open letter, coordinated by Extinction Rebellion and signed by a coalition of anti-EfW campaigners, presents a deeply flawed and misleading analysis of energy recovery in the United Kingdom.

The letter, addressed to the Prime Minister, claims that energy recovery infrastructure will hinder the United Kingdom's pursuit of net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, but it fails to acknowledge that energy recovery has, in fact, helped to significantly reduce carbon emissions associated with residual waste treatment over the past twenty years by displacing waste volumes from landfill - since landfill is a greater emitter of Greenhouse Gas (GHG) than energy-recovery.

Alongside recycling, re-use and waste avoidance activities, energy-recovery is part of a holistic waste management system which aims to extract as much value from waste materials as possible, while providing a fundamental sanitation service to society. In accordance with the waste hierarchy, over the past twenty years, energy recovery continues to replace landfill as the preferable means of treating waste which cannot be viably recycled (residual waste).

By 2030, the delivery pipeline for new energy recovery infrastructure will save a further million tonnes of CO₂e from entering the atmosphere each year, by displacing millions of tonnes of additional waste from landfill. Currently, however, the United Kingdom has an energy-recovery capacity deficit and remains heavily reliant on both landfill and on exports (for energy recovery) to treat our residual waste.

The open letter also claims that UK energy recovery capacity is "poised to expand by 20 million tonnes by 2030" but this is a gross overstatement and only a small fraction of potential projects are likely to be delivered in practice to reflect the actual capacity of the market.

Scaremongering statements like this create a confrontational discourse about energy recovery and only serve to hinder the efficacy of this essential infrastructure. Indeed, a report published this summer by independent think-tank [Policy Connect](#), which was supported by a cross-party group of parliamentarians, identifies the valuable "untapped potential" of energy recovery infrastructure which could see plants used to generate low-carbon heat for up to half a million homes given the right policy signals – whereas at present, they're often driven to out-of-centre locations where heat offtake is challenging.

ESA Executive Director, Jacob Hayler, said: *“The recycling and waste sector accounts for only a very small percentage of UK carbon emissions, largely thanks to the huge greenhouse gas savings we’ve made as an industry by driving waste material out of landfill over the last two decades.*

ESA members remain in pursuit of ever-lower carbon emissions for the sector and, alongside the Government’s ambitious Resources & Waste Strategy, we are collectively developing a sector-leading net-zero strategy which will improve the efficiency of energy recovery infrastructure; drive more and more fossil-based materials out of energy recovery into recycling streams; and identify a range of wider measures to reduce the carbon intensity of recycling, collection operations and ancillary services.

Energy-from-waste (EfW) serves a vital public sanitation function in the United Kingdom and is a complementary part of an evolving, holistic, waste management system. Ambitious new policies being introduced through the Resources & Waste Strategy, and those of the devolved administrations, will help our sector to drive recycling performance, while limiting the proportion of plastics in residual waste – but as the open letter coordinated by Extinction Rebellion acknowledges, there will always be residue to treat even if we achieve the most optimistic national recycling performance, and energy recovery will continue to serve this important purpose.”

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