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A Greenpeace brief on the report

Economic Evaluation of PVC Waste Management¹

published by the European Commission

Key quote from the report:

"In all cases the environmental consequences of diversion from incineration lead to environmental improvements across the range of effects for which quantification has been possible."

Key findings of the report:

- diverting PVC from incineration always leads to environmental improvements
- the environmental benefits outweigh the financial costs of diverting PVC from incineration
- PVC waste destined for incineration will increase more than fivefold over the next 20 years in a business-as-usual scenario, from 0.5 million tonnes to 2.6-2.9 million tonnes per year
- assuming the most optimistic recycling scenario, incineration of PVC waste would still increase more than fourfold to 2.3-2.5 million tonnes per year in 2020
- assuming a diversion of PVC waste from incineration to landfill, incineration of PVC waste would still increase more than threefold to 1.8-2.0 million tonnes per year in 2020
- the neutralisation of the chlorine content of PVC in flue gas cleaning gives rise to additional costs for the incineration of PVC, amounting on average to 85 Euro/tonne for flexible PVC and 165 Euro/tonne for rigid PVC
- the additional costs for the incineration of PVC are spread across all materials sent for incineration, which results in a hidden subsidy for PVC incineration
- numerous environmental impacts were impossible to quantify and were therefore omitted from the financial assessment of the environmental costs, but it is likely that most of these environmental impacts would increase the benefits of the diversion of PVC from incineration

Anything is better than incineration

Aware of the problems associated with PVC incineration, the European Commission commissioned this study to assess the cost of diverting PVC waste away from incineration (and in particular, towards recycling) and the associated environmental costs and benefits.

The study reasserts that incineration is the worst waste disposal option for PVC:

"In all cases the environmental consequences of diversion from incineration lead to environmental improvements across the range of effects for which quantification has been possible"

¹ AEA Technology in collaboration with Metroeconomica, K A Brown, M R Holland, R A Boyd, S Thresh, H Jones, S M Ogilvie, June 2000

The authors acknowledge that impact assessments were not carried out for numerous environmental burdens, as they were impossible to quantify, and have therefore been omitted from the study. However, they state that *“it looks likely that most [omitted externalities] would increase the benefits of the diversion of material from incineration.”*

With this in mind, it is of great concern that, according to the business-as-usual scenario in the study, incineration will increase more than fivefold over the next 20 years, from 0.5 million tonnes to 2.6-2.9 million tonnes.

Is recycling the solution?

Is it then possible to reverse this trend towards more incineration by furthering recycling of PVC? This study reveals that even when the maximum recycling potential was achieved, the expected increase in PVC incineration would be lowered only marginally. Despite maximum recycling efforts, the incineration of PVC would still increase to 2.2-2.5 million tonnes in 2020.

It is evident from this study that the waste disposal problems associated with PVC will not be solved by recycling. Even if vast resources were to be used to promote PVC recycling, the effects would only be marginal.

The scope of the problem and the urgency of rapid action against PVC is highlighted by the final words of the authors:

“Whatever the future for PVC this problem will remain with us for many years as a consequence of the large stock of long-lived PVC products currently in use throughout Europe.”