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Towards sustainable management of material resources in the EU

Sustainable
resource use

Paper realised with the collaboration of:



At the 2024 edition of the Think2030 conference on 27 March 2024, IEEP hosted high-level speakers to discuss “Towards an EU resource management law: how to tackle excessive use and consumption of materials”. Moderated by Antoine Oger – Research Director of the Institute of European Environmental Policy (IEEP), the session featured interventions by the following speakers: Emma Watkins – Senior Policy Analyst (IEEP); Lasse Miettinen – Director of Sustainability Solutions at the Finnish Innovation Fund (SITRA); Janez Potočnik – Co-Chair of the International Resource Panel; Bram Soenen – Senior Expert on Product Policy, Belgian Presidency; Nazaré Couto – CENSE, member of the [Think Sustainable Europe network](#) in Portugal; and Joe Papineschi – Chairperson, Eunomia. This policy brief is the result of that Science4Policy session discussion.

Towards sustainable management of material resources in the EU

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The EU institutions should investigate with urgency the possibility of introducing a **dedicated new EU Material Resource Law** to increase political ambition and drive practical action.
- The EU should pursue **real systems change towards circularity**, based on sound science, to decouple resource use from associated impacts.
- **Existing EU policy and legislation must be bolstered and adapted** to systematically support sustainable material resource use and circularity, including measures on recycled content, product design, key definitions, public procurement, digital passports, green claims, and rules for businesses.
- The EU should **provide and promote financing and financial instruments** that support research and innovation, businesses, and Member States and send the right market signals to support sustainable material resource management.
- The EU institutions should **support communication efforts on sustainable resource use**, consulting with and providing facts to stakeholders to gain their support and trust.

Why does the EU need to address material resource management?

The extraction, use, and discarding of material resources make a significant contribution to the critical environmental problems that we face today: climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss. In 2022, the EU's material footprint sat at 14.5 tonnes per capita – around double the estimated sustainable level – and the EU economy was only 11.5% circular. The EU has exceeded the planetary boundaries for use of mineral and metal resources, for climate change, and for use of fossil-fuel-based products (among others), and resource use is still forecast to grow in the coming years. Figures such as this highlight the need for serious, concerted action to make resource use and management in the EU more sustainable.

If such action isn't taken – and soon – there is a significant risk that unsustainable resource use will make it impossible to attain the Green Deal's objectives on climate neutrality, resource efficiency and competitiveness, the goals of the European Climate Law and the objectives of the EU Circular Economy Action Plan.

Why should the EU act now on material resource use?

In addition to the simple urgency to act outlined above, there are several reasons why now is the right time for EU level action.

Firstly, the issue of sustainable resource use is increasingly featured in international policy discussions. The International Resource Panel's *Global Resources Outlook 2024*¹, published at the beginning of March 2024, calls for bold policy action to define sustainable resource use paths. The European Environment Agency report *Accelerating the circular economy in Europe*², published the same month, specifically recognises the need to reduce current unsustainable product consumption. Also in March 2024, a group of over 70 NGOs published a manifesto entitled *A resilient and resource-wise Europe: Sufficiency at the heart of the EU's future*³, demanding energy consumption and material footprint reduction targets.

Secondly, the issue is gaining traction at the national level in the EU. Some Member States have already set targets to reduce material resource consumption. The Netherlands aims to reduce its use of primary abiotic raw materials by 50% by 2030 (baseline: 2014). The Flanders Region of Belgium is targeting a 30% reduction in material footprint by 2030, and 75% by 2050. Austria aims to reduce its material footprint by 80% to 7 tons per capita by 2050. In addition, France seeks to increase resource productivity by 30% between 2010 and 2030, and Germany is developing concrete targets on total material productivity and circular material use. Policies such as these demonstrate growing political will amongst Member States to act, which could also translate to support for EU level action.

¹ <https://www.unep.org/resources/Global-Resource-Outlook-2024>

² <https://www.eea.europa.eu/publications/accelerating-the-circular-economy>

³ https://www.acrplus.org/images/position-papers/2024_03_Sufficiency_Manifesto.pdf

Finally, the issue is already under discussion at the EU level. During the first half of 2024 the Belgian Presidency of the Council held discussions on how to enhance sustainable resource management and further reduce the EU's material footprint. In addition, the new European Parliament and Commission will take up their roles and decide their priorities in the coming months. Whilst the outcome of the June 2024 elections may pose a challenge to ambitious environmental policies, there is nevertheless an opportunity – if stakeholders continue to push for specific and focused action on sustainable resource management, backed by sound science and research – to keep the issue on the EU agenda for the coming years.

What can the EU actually do to support sustainable resource management?

The Science4Policy session discussed various policy options that could be pursued at the EU level, and which could be taken individually or together to support the more sustainable management of resources.

1. Introduce a new dedicated piece of EU legislation on materials management – an EU Material Resource Law⁴

This would be the most ambitious option. An overarching legal act should include a headline material resource consumption reduction target, and could also include targets for material efficiency and sustainable sourcing. The resource consumption reduction target should include all materials – biomass, fossil fuels, minerals, and metals – and could be either a relative reduction target (similar to the approach already taken in several Member States) or an absolute target – either must be based on sound science. Consideration should also be given to the development of a 'material use hierarchy' to drive efficient use of materials and material conservation⁵. Such a piece of legislation would create significant political momentum and help to steer the development and adaptation of other EU policy and legislation to support sustainable resource management – in other words, to mainstream the issue.

The approach taken in the EU Climate Law, which introduced a headline target to increase political ambition and drive action, could inspire a similar approach on material resource management. Practical implementation could also be inspired by the EU Climate Law, for example with the creation of an independent scientific advisory body on material resources, and the development of Member State and sectoral plans.

2. Pursue real systems change based on sound science

Although the EU has the ambition to become a circular economy, and has now moved away from just focusing on end-of-life and waste aspects of circularity and more resolutely into product circularity, there has not yet been real systems change towards circularity. To achieve circularity, the EU needs to decouple its resource use from the associated impacts by changing its approach to the most resource-intensive systems, notably energy, buildings, and mobility. For example, it is no longer enough to seek to make cars more sustainable (e.g. by shifting to

⁴ See for example: <https://ieep.eu/publications/making-the-case-for-an-eu-resources-law/>

⁵ See for example: <https://eunomia.eco/reports/managing-materials-for-1-50c-an-eu-regulatory-framework-for-a-low-carbon-material-economy/>

electric vehicles and promoting the use of recycled content) – we need to think about mobility as a whole system and make that whole system sustainable. A broad, scientific process will be needed to develop and support these new systems.

3. Bolster existing EU policy and legislative efforts to create a systematic, coherent approach to achieving a circular economy

Even if new dedicated material resource legislation is introduced, and systems change is pursued, existing EU policy and legislation should be adapted to systematically and coherently support sustainable material resource use and circularity. Just promoting recycling is no longer enough. Steps should include, but not necessarily be limited to:

- Increasing required levels of recycled content (e.g. taking the Batteries Regulation as inspiration to also promote recycled content in other products) to boost secondary material demand;
- Using product policy and product standards to ensure more sustainable design (promoting longevity, repairability, reusability, recyclability, and recycled content), including through the Ecodesign for Sustainable Products Regulation;
- Setting EU definitions to support circularity, including end of waste criteria;
- Promoting the more effective use of public procurement to leverage circularity;
- Ensuring good flows of information, for example by extending the use of digital product passports and ensuring green claims are accurate;
- Ensuring Single Market measures are supportive of the circular economy transition, and that related rules for businesses are clear and simple.

4. Provide financing and promote the use of financial instruments to send the right market signals

Research and innovation will be crucial to complement EU policy and legislative initiatives on material resource management and support the necessary systems change. Many businesses, including SMEs, are developing innovative solutions that if piloted and scaled up in market readiness level could drive improvements in products and production methods, including more efficient use of material resources (e.g. through material substitution, efficiency, or servicification). EU financing would help to drive demand for these innovative solutions and amplify their positive impacts.

There are still significant differences between Member States in terms of their level of development regarding sustainable material resource management and the pursuit of circularity. For the EU to be sustainable and resilient, it is important that no one is left behind, and the EU must therefore support those Member States who are struggling more with the green transition.

Fiscal and financial instruments should also play a role by sending the right signals to the market, for example to support more sustainable products and services. This can include the wider application of extended producer responsibility with eco-modulation, and material and product taxes. Developing EU-wide taxation is a challenge, but a worthwhile goal to help to ensure a more coherent economic environment and a fairer, more level playing field for businesses across the EU.

5. **Communicate the importance of sustainable resource use and work with stakeholders**

Communication, awareness-raising, and understanding based on facts and evidence are crucial for building support, particularly for policies that are potentially controversial or unpopular, such as limiting resource use. The EU can play a role in gathering support from stakeholders and the public. It is important to consult with stakeholders, learn from their knowledge and expertise, and include them in policy processes. In addition, the EU should share with stakeholders factual, measured information about the importance of sustainable resource use, options to address it, and the benefits and potential impacts in the short, medium, and long term. Stakeholder engagement and good communication will help to increase support for this area of environmental action, and trust in the EU's efforts to address it.

Conclusions from the session

- The EU needs to act urgently on material resource management, to tackle the critical environmental problems of climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss, to get back within planetary boundaries, and to ensure that the EU's Green Deal, climate, and circularity objectives are not jeopardised.
- Now is the right time for EU action, building on international momentum, learning from Member State initiatives, and pressing to keep material resource management high on the agenda of the new European Commission and Parliament.
- A new, dedicated EU Material Resource Law, taking the design of the EU Climate Law as inspiration, is an ambitious but achievable goal that would set the agenda and help to create political ambition and drive practical action.
- Pursuing real systems change towards circularity, and decoupling resource use from its impacts, will make crucial contributions to sustainable management of material resources in the EU.
- The EU should also act to make existing policy and legislation fit for purpose to support sustainable material resource management, ensure that related financing and financial instruments are available, and consult and communicate with stakeholders to gain their support on the issue.

About Think2030

Launched by IEEP and its partners in 2018, Think2030 is an evidence-based, non-partisan platform of leading policy experts from European think tanks, civil society, the private sector and local authorities.

By focusing on producing relevant, timely and concrete policy recommendations, Think2030's key objective is to identify science-policy solutions for a more sustainable Europe.

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