Increasing recycling in the EU construction sector

EuRIC POSITION PAPER
July 2023
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14 July 2023

The European Recycling Industries’ Confederation (EuRIC) is the umbrella organisation that encompasses a network of national recycling associations and leading recycling companies. EuRIC aims to be the link between the recycling industry and the European Union, together with other representatives of the sector, acting as a platform for cooperation and the exchange of best practices across the industry. EuRIC represents key companies included in the collection, processing, recycling, transport, and trade of various recyclables (metals, paper, plastics, tyres, construction & demolition waste from household or industrial waste, WEEE, ELV, Packaging, etc.) across Europe.

While the European construction and demolition (C&D) sector generates the largest amount of waste in the EU and represents around 12% of EU GHG emissions, it is dramatically lacking behind when it comes to circularity. This position paper outlines the key drivers and needs for making the European construction sector more circular.

I. Untapped potentials and benefits of recycled materials from C&D

The construction sector faces different evolutions, such as an increased scarcity of building materials, rising costs of sand, gravel and other natural aggregates, bottlenecks in the disposal of construction waste, as well as increasingly difficult, time-consuming and costly construction projects with increased transport routes for the supply of building materials. In this context, increasing traffic and environmental pollution, as well as negative effects on our climate remain unevaluated and insufficiently addressed. At the same time, the potential for a more circular construction sector has not been sufficiently exploited.

Functioning recycling in the C&D sector is first and foremost essential for proper waste management in every EU Member State, as it enables the appropriate managing of enormous quantities of waste from C&D to the benefit of circular economy and the reduction of the use of natural resources for environmental protection. Recycling C&D waste can also significantly reduce the CO2 footprint of construction when recycled C&D materials are integrated again into new construction products\(^1\). Increasing the use of recycled materials from C&D also creates new local jobs in the circular economy in Europe. Recycled on-site, it can contribute to decreasing transport costs and related CO2 emissions. At the same time, the use of recycled materials from C&D also saves natural resources, such as sand, gravel, aggregate materials or land, minimizing negative impacts on the air, noise and the climate. While every single ton of recycled construction material is also one ton of

construction material that does not go to land- or backfilling, recycling C&D waste can contribute to reducing the need for scarce backfilling and landfilling capacities as well².

II. Measures needed for a functioning market for recycled materials from C&D in the EU

For increasing the circularity of the EU construction sector, it is paramount to increase the market for recycled materials from C&D, which remains very limited so far. While recycled materials from C&D bring environmental benefits, they can also replace natural ones in many applications without compromising the quality and performance of the work. In order to develop a market for recycled materials in the EU, specifications for recycled materials from C&D for usage in new construction works must be established, as well as end-of-waste criteria. Legislative changes at the EU level are required for achieving a more circular construction sector in the EU. As a result, EuRIC calls for the following measures to be adopted at the EU level:

A. Mandatory recycled content targets in construction products

As the EU market fails to ensure the uptake of recycled materials with environmental benefits and the same quality and performance characteristics as primary construction materials, increasing circularity in the construction sector requires setting mandatory use of recycled materials in construction products under EU legislation. It should be ensured that EU legislation increases demand for recycled materials from C&D that gives the planning and investment security for recyclers to scale up capacities in the EU. Only a mandatory tool ensuring demand for recycled materials from C&R can ensure a market for recycling of C&D materials and a shift towards more circularity in the construction sector.

B. Mandatory Green Public Procurement (GPP)

GPP criteria for recycled materials from C&D must be swiftly developed at the EU level. The public sector is in a key position to influence and support the decarbonization of the construction industry, accounting for 40 to 60% of purchases and 20-30% of revenues of some of the most energy-intensive construction industries (i.e. concrete). Despite its importance, GPP remains largely fragmented within and across Member States, thus limiting its potential. Setting mandatory EU criteria through the CPR represents a key opportunity to ensure a large-scale demand for sustainable construction products driving the European construction market. This should be reflected as well in the work with the national environment and infrastructure ministries.

² 2022-01_BRBayern_Positionspapier_Januar 2022.pdf (baustoffrecycling-bayern.de)
C. Adoption of EU End-Of-Waste (EOW) criteria

As practice in recent years has shown, builders and public authorities have been particularly diffident and distrustful in buying and using recycled materials from C&D. Introducing EU EOW criteria shall contribute to increasing confidence in and acceptance of recycled materials from C&D for builders and authorities. Most importantly, EU EOW criteria shall be designed based on established national EOW criteria that enable the uptake of recycled materials from C&D in new construction works and facilitates the substitution of extracted raw materials.

The introduction of a European EOW Regulation could help to better secure the users of recycled C&D materials and simplify their movements throughout the European Union. The Regulation could not only increase the acceptance of recycled C&D materials but also foster and strengthen the demand for them. EU EOW criteria must take into account the existing national EOW regulations in some EU countries, which have made it possible to establish clear and well-defined rules both on when materials change from waste to product and how they are used.

Representing the interests of European recyclers of C&D materials, we are looking forward to a constructive dialogue with the construction industry and inspire from best practices at the national and local level to bring forward at the EU level in view of making the EU construction sector more circular.