

Analysis



Industry sounds environmental warning

The UK Asphalt Industry has voiced serious fears of widespread environmental pollution that could result from the Government's current policy on the use of Reprocessed Fuel Oil (RFO).

The asphalt industry uses half of the 400,000t of oil collected annually from garages as fuel in the drying and heating of stone. But from December this could be prevented under new EU legislation, the Waste Incineration Directive (WID).

The WID is intended to control the incineration of household and hazardous waste, and according to the Quarry Products Association (QPA), the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) is unreasonably applying it to RFO.

QPA argues that RFO is not a waste but a recovered product and as such should not be within the directive's scope.

And it maintains that if the asphalt market for RFO is lost, the oil recycling industry will collapse. Garages will no

longer benefit from free collection of used oil which may lead to disposal by uncontrolled illegal methods that are environmentally very damaging.

In March DEFRA made each of the 150 asphalt sites using RFO apply for Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control (IPPC) Permits. This requires operators to specify how they will upgrade their combustion equipment so that they conform to the new legislation; in particular the burners must achieve a temperature of 850 degrees centigrade for two seconds. Technically this is possible but expensive - around £400,000 for each site.

QPA describes the investment as "grossly uneconomic" - and in reality permit application is little more than a stay of execution for the RFO industry. It is likely that come the 28 December deadline, aggregate producers will simply withdraw their permit applications and switch over to virgin gas oil - creating something of an environmental double whammy.

Simon van der Byl, Chief Executive of

the QPA, says: "For over 30 years, the asphalt-producing industry has been sustainably re-using engine oil from garages throughout the UK, enabling its free collection and reprocessing in full compliance with UK legislation. By forcing garages to pay to have this used oil removed, the prospect of some illegal disposal of used oil becomes a significant environmental risk.

"There is no sense in DEFRA creating risks for the environment," continues Mr van der Byl, "when the best practicable environmental option is already in use and well proven."

And with so much riding on the classification of RFO, the European Commission is reassessing the Waste Framework Directive and, specifically, the point at which "wastes" are considered fully recovered. Their findings, says QPA, will inform the unequivocal classification of RFO and at the very least DEFRA should extend its deadlines until a clearer view emerges from Europe.