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NATIONAL WASTE MANAGEMENT AGENCY SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED TO TACKLE GROWING WASTE CRISIS – FORFÁS

A National Waste Management Agency should be established to spearhead the actions needed to tackle Ireland's growing waste crisis, according to a new report published today (Tuesday, 11 December 2001) by Forfás.

A Forfás task force, chaired by Professor Michael Hillery, was established earlier this year to develop proposals to improve the waste management process from the planning stage to the delivery of programmes for waste prevention and minimisation and the development of the infrastructure for recycling and energy recovery. The task force included representatives of the Department of the Environment and Local Government, IDA Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Irish Business Employers Confederation and business interests.

The report notes that, at present, waste management in Ireland is a critical point and will deteriorate further unless proposed measures to improve the situation are speedily implemented. Recent reports show that between 1995 and 1998, waste generation in Ireland increased by 89%. Such growth is clearly unsustainable and highlights the urgent need to de-couple waste generation from economic growth.

While Ireland is similar to other European countries in that the quantity of waste being generated is increasing, one factor that sets Ireland apart from the majority of its European counterparts is its above average growth rate in waste production. This is directly attributable to Ireland's increased economic prosperity in recent years.

The report focuses on three areas critical to the implementation of an integrated waste management system. Within each of these three areas, actions that need to be taken are identified.

Building Consensus & Improving Co-ordination

- A National Waste Management Agency should be established to provide the co-ordination and a central focus to fulfil the wide range of functions needed to implement national, regional and county waste management plans.
- Regional waste management boards, structured so as to include the same local authorities that came together in the formulation of the regional waste management plans, should be put in place to work with the National Waste Management Agency, while maintaining local ownership of plans.
- A two-way communication programme should be implemented to help in arriving at a shared national vision for waste management. To meet the public desire for more information on waste issues, this programme should be supported by an expert information group, capable of answering specific technical questions.

Accelerating the Planning Process

- The Strategical Environmental Assessment approach should be used

to identify how best to minimise any potential negative impact in developing the new infrastructure specified in the national, regional and county plans. These plans should be incorporated into the overall framework of the National Spatial Strategy so that supporting infrastructure can be planned.

- In order to expedite the development of waste management infrastructure, an alternative process is proposed based on the pre-designation of "Waste Management Centres" – a concept contained in the Planning and Development Act 2000. Potential sites for specific types of waste management projects would be identified and a planning scheme and Environmental Impact Statement developed. The planning process would then be completed in the normal way with a full third party objection and appeal process. Individual projects could then be considered if they meet the detailed requirements of the planning scheme.
- Incentives should be provided to compensate for perceived and real disadvantages experienced by a community as a result of it hosting a waste management facility on behalf of the wider population.

Delivering Programmes & Infrastructure

- Demonstration programmes and best practice guidelines should be put in place to promote waste prevention and minimisation. Public bodies should play a leading role by implementing waste prevention programmes within their organisations. In addition, increased landfill costs should be coupled with better enforcement of existing waste legislation to prevent illegal disposal of waste.
- Enterprise Ireland and the Department of the Environment and Local Government should pool their expertise and work together to promote the establishment of recycling projects by the private sector. Measures should be put in place to ensure effective segregation of waste streams at source and public bodies should help to stimulate markets for recycled materials by removing barriers to the use of such materials in public construction projects, adopting green purchasing procedures within their own organisations and attaching relevant conditions to the award of contracts and tenders to external groups.
- The establishment of a central facility for the thermal treatment of non-hazardous and hazardous waste should be facilitated in a location such as County Cork, which produces over 60% of Ireland's industrial hazardous waste. The potential impact from increased traffic should be addressed by traffic management programmes.

Commenting on the report, the chief executive of Forfás, Mr John Travers, stressed the importance of waste management as a regional issue. He said that the current waste management infrastructure in Ireland is proving to be inadequate to dispose of the additional waste produced over the last five years. "Increasingly, there are reports of commercial waste being turned away from landfill sites around the country. There are also concerns as to whether Ireland will be able to continue exporting its hazardous waste to other European countries, a situation which is highly susceptible to change in the receiving countries' waste management strategies."

Mr Travers added that while efforts were currently underway to address the lack of waste management infrastructure in Ireland, it was clear that the present rate of development of infrastructure will not be sufficient to deal with Ireland's deteriorating waste management crisis. "Comprehensive action is required without delay," he said.

He pointed out that all sectors of Irish society generated waste and have a major role to play in arriving at an integrated waste management solution. Industry's role was particularly important, he said, because manufacturing facilities generated significant quantities of waste and a very high proportion of that waste is going to landfill sites. On the other hand, manufacturing companies had the potential to recycle waste material and, through the application of eco-design principles, they could minimise the amount of waste generated in the first place.

(ENDS).

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