



# “Waste hierarchy: in need of revival?”

“A futureproof EU Waste Framework Directive” workshop  
13:30 – 14:45 Breakout session

## Statement 1: “New (r)evolutions force us to rethink the waste hierarchy”:

By classifying treatment options based on their environmental impacts, the waste hierarchy is a pillar of Europe’s waste management. Cemented in the waste framework directive since 2008, it remains more than ever relevant to minimize waste and ensure that materials embedded in end-of-life products are channeled back into circular value chains. Yet the world has changed since 2008. New concepts have risen such as the different R-strategies for a circular economy which could further refine the prevention step. New insights about recycling have made us aware that different ways of recycling have different environmental benefits. And new technologies such as chemical recycling have come up, that are not yet integrated in the waste hierarchy. Does the waste hierarchy need refinement? Or does it need a major revamping?

In the first part of the workshop we reflect upon recent evolutions and revolutions in waste management and circular economy thinking and how they could or should impact the waste hierarchy principles in the European waste framework directive.

### **A few examples of subjects that we will reflect upon:**

- Should specific prevention strategies such as the leasing/sharing economy and concepts like ‘products as a service’ be mentioned more explicitly in the waste hierarchy?
- Should we refine the recycling step in the waste hierarchy? Should we differentiate between open vs closed loop recycling ? Between up- and downcycling? Or take into account the number of times a product/material can be recycled? And do we need to position chemical recycling in the waste hierarchy? Should it be on equal footing with mechanical recycling? Or lower in the hierarchy? Or maybe higher?
- Should the waste hierarchy be linked more explicitly with product policy? How could product evolutions such as ecodesign principles or lightweight materials affect the waste hierarchy?
- Do we still need a traditional waste hierarchy based upon treatment options at all? Or has it become obsolete in an evolution towards resource thinking and is an [EU Resources Law](#) the way to go?

## Statement 2: “It’s not the waste hierarchy but its implementation that is in need of revival”

Although the waste hierarchy could benefit from refinement, the basic principle behind it is still fit for purpose: prevention -> re-use -> recycling -> recovery -> disposal. Yet numbers show that this principle is not being put into practice sufficiently. If the focus would lie on the upper tiers only unavoidable waste would be generated<sup>1</sup> and this would result in a lower waste generation than what we have today. According to the [EEA’s review of the 8th EAP](#) it is “unlikely but uncertain” that the total waste generation would decrease significantly by 2030. In order to reach this objective, substantial additional efforts are needed in implementing circular economy measures<sup>2</sup>, which means we need measures to actually implement the highest step in the waste hierarchy.

The [latest IPCC report](#) recognizes the potential of the waste hierarchy as a compass to guide the necessary behavioural and technological transformations to maximise the potential of the circular economy in climate change mitigation. The upper stages of the waste hierarchy are not only correlated to the best environmental outcomes, but also with the highest job creation potential. The waste hierarchy is a crucial tool to unlock powerful synergies in the environmental, economic and social domains. And yet this is not where the vast majority of policy is focused on. A stronger application of the principle is now more crucial than ever to fulfil some of the EU’s key objectives related to climate change and environmental protection, while also fostering competitiveness and re-industrialization.

### **Some questions we will reflect upon regarding this challenge:**

- How can we shift the implementation to the top of the hierarchy?
- Are there inconsistencies to be found in the Waste Framework Directive itself that form a barrier for proper implementation of the waste hierarchy?
- Do waste prevention programs need to be more stringent (see article 29 of the Waste Framework Directive)?
- Could binding prevention targets in the Waste Framework Directive benefit the implementation of the waste hierarchy? Should these targets be met by producers or Member States? Or is this dependent on the waste stream?
- How can we tackle the mismatch between the waste hierarchy and EU policies, instruments and initiatives? What policies, instruments or initiatives could help the implementation of the waste hierarchy?

Questions, more information:  
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<sup>1</sup> EEA report, [Accelerating the circular economy in Europe – State and outlook 2024](#)

<sup>2</sup> EEA report, [Monitoring report on progress towards the 8th EAP objectives](#)