How the EU wants to achieve a circular economy by 2050

Recycling is an important part of the circular economy

Find out about the EU’s circular economy action plan and what additional measures MEPs want to reduce waste and make products more sustainable.

If we keep on exploiting resources as we do now, by 2050 we would need the resources of three Earths. Finite resources and climate issues require moving from a ‘take-make-dispose’ society to a carbon-neutral, environmentally sustainable, toxic-free and fully circular economy by 2050.

The current crisis highlighted weaknesses in resource and value chains, hitting small and medium-sized enterprises and industry. A circular economy will cut CO2-emissions, whilst stimulating economic growth and creating job opportunities.
Read more about the definition and benefits of the circular economy

The EU circular economy action plan

In line with EU’s 2050 climate neutrality goal under the Green Deal, the European Commission proposed in March 2022 the first package of measures to speed up transition towards a circular economy, as announced in the Circular Economy Action Plan. The proposals include boosting sustainable products, empowering consumers for the green transition, the review of the construction product regulation, as well as a strategy on sustainable textiles.

In November 2022, the European Commission proposed new EU-wide rules on packaging. It includes proposals to improve packaging design, such as clear labelling, to promote reuse and recycling. It also calls for a transition to bio-based, biodegradable, and compostable plastics.

The Parliament called for tighter recycling rules and binding 2030 targets for materials use and consumption in a resolution adopted on 9 February 2021.

In October 2022, Parliament approved a revision of rules on persistent organic pollutants (POPs) to reduce the amount of dangerous chemicals in waste and production processes. The new rules will introduce stricter limits, ban certain chemicals and keep pollutants away from recycling.

Moving to sustainable products

The production process starts with raw materials and global supply chains were hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2021, MEPs asked for a comprehensive EU strategy for critical raw materials based on sustainable sourcing and high environmental, social and human rights standards. MEPs want to reduce the EU’s reliance on a few non-EU countries and want to promote recycling and recovery of critical raw materials.

To achieve an EU market of sustainable, climate-neutral and resource-efficient products, the Commission proposes extending the Ecodesign Directive to non-energy-related products and creating Digital Product Passports, with the aim of sharing all relevant information along the product lifecycle.

MEPs also back initiatives to fight planned obsolescence, improve the durability and reparability of products and to strengthen consumer rights with the right to repair. They insist consumers have the right to be properly informed about the environmental impact of the products and services they buy and asked the Commission to make proposals to fight so-called greenwashing, when companies present themselves as being more environmentally-friendly than they really are.
The Commission put forward a proposal to update EU consumer rules to support the green transition in March 2022 and a proposal for a directive on substantiating green claims in March 2023.

In January 2024, MEPs approved a provisional agreement with the Council to update the EU consumer rules, which would ban greenwashing and provide more information to consumers’ on the durability of products.

Making crucial sectors circular

Circularity and sustainability must be incorporated in all stages of a value chain to achieve a fully circular economy: from design to production and all the way to the consumer. The Commission action plan sets down seven key areas essential to achieving a circular economy: plastics; textiles; e-waste; food, water and nutrients; packaging; batteries and vehicles; buildings and construction.

Plastics

MEPs back the European Strategy for Plastics in a Circular Economy, which would phase out the use of microplastics.

*Read more about the EU strategy to reduce plastic waste*

Textiles

Textiles use a lot of raw materials and water, with less than 1% recycled.

The EU strategy for sustainable and circular textiles presented by the Commission in March 2020 aims to ensure that by 2030 textile products placed on the EU market are long-lived and recyclable, made as much as possible of recycled fibres and free of hazardous substances.

MEPs want new measures against microfibre loss and stricter standards on water use.

*Discover how textile production and waste affects the environment*

Electronics and ICT

Electronic and electrical waste, or e-waste, is the fastest growing waste stream in the EU and less than 40% is recycled. MEPs want the EU to promote longer product life through reusability and reparability.

*Learn some E-waste facts and figures*
Food, water and nutrients

An estimated 20% of food is lost or wasted in the EU. MEPs urge the halving of food waste by 2030 under the Farm to Fork Strategy.

Packaging

Packaging waste in Europe is growing. Each person in the EU generated on average 189 kg of packaging waste in 2021. EU is working on the revision of the rules on packaging and packaging waste to reduce its amount and improve the situation.

Batteries and vehicles

MEPs agreed new rules requiring the production and materials of all batteries on the EU market to have a low carbon footprint and respect human rights, social and ecological standards.

Find out the new EU rules for more sustainable and ethical batteries proposed by Parliament

Construction and buildings

Construction accounts for more than 35% of total EU waste. MEPs want to increase the lifespan of buildings, set reduction targets for the carbon footprint of materials and establish minimum requirements on resource and energy efficiency.

Waste management and shipment

The EU generates more than 2.5 billion tonnes of waste a year. TEU exports of waste to non-EU countries reached 32.7 million tonnes in 2020. The majority of shipped waste consists of ferrous and nonferrous metal scrap as well as paper, plastic, textile and glass wastes and mainly goes to Turkey, India and Egypt.

MEPs urge EU countries to increase high-quality recycling, move away from landfilling, minimise incineration and reduce harmful chemicals in waste. In January 2023, Parliament voted on its position regarding waste shipment rules, which aim to promote reuse and recycling and reduce pollution.

Under the rules, waste exported from the EU should be managed in an environmentally sound manner in the destination countries and enforcement should be stepped up to counteract illegal shipments. Within the EU, MEPs want a better exchange of information and transparency on shipments. EU exports of hazardous waste to non-OECD countries should, in general, be prohibited. Exports of plastic waste to non-OECD countries should also be banned, while such exports to OECD countries should be phased out within four years.
Find out about landfilling and recycling statistics in the EU

More about the circular economy
- Environment committee's circular economy report
- Check legislative progress
- Procedural steps
- European Commission page on the circular economy
- Infographic: circular economy
- The environmental impact of plastics and micro-plastics use, waste and pollution (October 2020)
- Facebook interview with lead MEP Jan Huitema
- Fact sheet on sustainable consumption and production