

Thought leader | Umicore: Green Week 2014

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Thought Leader

Properly applied resource efficiency policies can enhance Europe's competitiveness, writes Egbert Lox.



Resource efficiency is part of the solution to many of the societal challenges that Europe currently faces. Together with recycling, resource efficiency can play a crucial and significant role in reducing our import dependency on raw materials. Resource efficiency therefore is a central aspect in delivering that all-important competitive edge for Europe in achieving our climate and energy targets by developing new innovative low carbon technologies.

The work of the European commission's high-level European resource efficiency platform confirms that the transition to a full circular economy can contribute to the EU's re-industrialisation and lead to more economic growth and business opportunities. What is more, a circular economy will create new jobs - three quarters of a million by 2025 - according to figures produced by the European environmental bureau.

"The transition to a full circular economy can contribute to the EU's re-industrialisation"

Today Umicore ranks as one of the most sustainable corporations in the world. Thanks to our voluntary decision to clean more than 200 years of industrial and mining operations, and by developing our competencies in metallurgy, material science and chemistry, we have transformed our business approach towards a closed loop model. Our transformation would not have been possible without innovation efforts and investment into new clean applications. We recycle complex waste streams containing precious and non-ferrous metals and transform metals into high-tech materials essential to our everyday life. However, new innovative business models are only a small part of a full and efficient circular economy. To achieve a true competitive circular economy, cooperation along the full value chain is crucial and that is where legislation plays a key role.

Implementation of the many EU level policies and initiatives, such as the raw materials initiative, the European resource efficiency flagship and the European innovation partnership on raw materials to name just a few, have helped to address the challenge of a resource efficient Europe. Nevertheless, gaps remain in achieving a full and true circular economy. Within the value chain, we believe that issues such as changing consumer behaviour and increasing awareness of the importance of depositing end-of-life products in appropriate collection points would have a significant impact. For example, only about a third of all electronic and electric equipment waste is currently properly collected. Once the materials are collected, they need to follow the correct chain through transparency of flows for either reuse or recycling and not deviated into dubious flows. Quality recycling, linked to human health standards and environmental performance, as well as technical performance are also crucial to recovering valuable and critical resources, and to supporting and enhancing Europe's competitiveness in this field.

The same applies for us, since we produce, supply and recycle automotive components such as catalysts and rechargeable battery materials in a safe and environmental sound way, and we believe this is our biggest contribution to a sustainable circular mobility. Each step is fundamental, as the saying goes, 'you are only as good as your weakest link'.

It is therefore crucial to set the appropriate legal framework conditions from authorities at different levels. I am convinced that the much-expected communication on the circular economy this year, presenting the revision of the waste framework policy and a resource efficiency indicator, will contribute to a full and true circular economy. However, we all need to ensure that the correct enforcement is in place.

About the author

Egbert Lox is senior vice-president of government affairs for Umicore

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