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Anaerobic Digestion – needs a heavier foot on the gas!

In February 2009, Defra published “Anaerobic Digestion - Shared Goals”, which Biffa broadly supports, but consider that the aspirations are far too modest when contrasted with critical commitments to abate climate change, an impending energy crisis, and real concerns about the UK’s ability to meet the 2012/13 Landfill Directive biodegradable waste diversion targets. We should remember that this latter obligation has already been made substantially softer by the exclusion by Defra of commercial/ industrial waste from the target tonnage.

Anaerobic digestion is already an established technology, extensively employed in the UK water industry for decades, and in the last 10 years this same technology has been used for the treatment of organic waste from food manufacturing. Anaerobic digestion as a mainstream waste treatment system is becoming more commonplace; Biffa operates a 40,000 tonne anaerobic digestion plant in Leicester for the treatment of food waste mechanically separated from “black bag” domestic refuse. In March this year we announced plans to build an 80,000 tonne merchant plant in Staffordshire, we will shortly be announcing details of new AD capacity in London and then later this year we will release details of further AD capacity that we will be developing across the country.

However this development comes at a price. Biffa estimates that the capital expenditure required for the treatment of 12M tonnes of food waste, the lower range of the Government’s estimate of the UK’s current arisings, will be in the range £1.8 to £2.4bn. This should be contrasted with the £10m additional support for anaerobic digestion and in-vessel composting infrastructure announced in the 2009 Budget, a sum welcomed but by any measure is, at best, very modest. Biffa’s view is for the Budget funding to be directed towards the agricultural sector where there is an urgent need to address the knowledge, technology and anaerobic digestion deliverability issues that do not exist in the mainstream waste management sector.

“There is more that Government can and needs to do urgently” said David Savory - Director Environment and External Affairs at Biffa.

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“Support for the development of anaerobic digestion is already available in the form of ROC’s for the renewable electricity generated. However, the real opportunity lies in the injection of bio-methane into the gas grid, technology that is already deployed in mainland Europe, so is currently available and deliverable in the UK. The gas grid in the UK is one of the most extensive in Western Europe and provides an established distribution system for energy, particularly heat. Use of bio-methane in this way will increase the energy conversion efficiency 3-fold based on the gas being utilised for domestic heating. Whilst Government has signalled that it intends to progress the development of a renewable heat incentive, which will hopefully cover such schemes, the earliest date for any firm commitment is April 2011. By then many waste management contracts employing significantly lower energy efficiency options will have been deployed and a massive immediate opportunity for renewable energy generation and climate change abatement will have been missed.”

Further press information from

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