

"We mustn't sleepwalk into regulation"

BIR president calls on recycling industry to take more forceful approach

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Maintaining the free flow of materials was the most important issue facing the recycling industry, according to BIR President Tom Bird (L).

"We as an industry now more than ever need to convey to the world the essential role we play in protecting the planet from climate change and the environmental damage caused by the extraction of primary raw materials", commented BIR president Tom Bird at the organisation's spring convention in Barcelona. In his opening remarks for the general assembly of the Bureau of International Recycling on Tuesday, he said that he believed that over the years, the industry had allowed "stereotypical views" of it to prevail and had sold itself short in terms of its importance.

"We must not sleepwalk into ever more restrictive legislation", Mr Bird said. "I would urge you all to become involved in this debate, to promote the truth about our industry's exceptional skills and to challenge misconceptions about what we do. Our unity of purpose and of voice remain crucial if we are to win through."

The BIR president described the legal conflation of "waste" and "secondary raw materials" as something that had been at the core of many of the recycling industry's "greatest ills" for more than 30 years. He promised that BIR would continue to be on the front line and working with its national association members in the fight to preserve the interests of the umbrella organisation's membership and the recycling industry as a whole. "Global free trade in recycled raw materials is essential for a truly global circular economy", Mr Bird said.

The recycling industry has been "too soft" in making its case

Speaking with media representatives ahead of the convention, the BIR president underlined the need for the recycling industry to be more forceful in promoting itself to policymakers in light of proposed regulation that would restrict the international trade in secondary raw materials. He said that in the past, the recycling industry had possibly been "too soft", or "worried about upsetting its markets rather than actually stating how it is". The end effect was that after twenty-five, thirty years of discussion, valuable raw materials were still being considered "waste".

With a proposal for revising the European Union's Waste Shipment Regulation (WSR) advancing through the legislative process, the industry would have to take a new tone, according to Mr Bird. A new approach was particularly important in light of recent statements from the steel industry expressing support for an export ban on scrap and the EU Commission's desire that more secondary raw materials remain in Europe and be available to European consumers at lower prices.

Smelters on the non-ferrous side were now also forging closer ties with the steel industry in their work in lobbying for regulatory change regarding secondary raw materials, Mr Bird said. Historically, there had been more alignment in the agendas of non-ferrous scrap suppliers and consumers. However, industry insiders were reporting in meetings with BIR management that that overlap was disappearing and that non-ferrous metals buyers were now also moving towards a position of favouring greater export restrictions.

Much more forceful approach needed

In the press event, Mr Bird argued that maintaining the free flow of materials was the biggest issue facing recyclers as a group. And as a group, the industry had to sell itself better and be "much more forceful" in their approach. While concerns about the impact of regulation on scrap metal trading were front and centre at the moment, there were also concerns that policymakers were failing to understand the key environmental role played by recyclers in the paper and e-scrap sectors.

In their efforts to modify legislative proposals to mitigate the damage to the industry, it was particularly important for BIR to maintain very strong links with national recycling associations, links that had been strengthened through regular online meetings during the pandemic, Mr Bird explained. Ross Bartley, the association's Trade and Environment Director, highlighted both in a press conference and in a separate conference session on Monday 23 May that BIR was prepared to assist national associations and member companies in submitting feedback during the legislative process. He highlighted the importance of formatting comments to lawmakers in the form of specific amendments and encouraged members, and particularly associations in non-OECD countries purchasing raw materials from the EU, to coordinate with the BIR to increase the chances that their voices would be heard in Brussels.