Identifying and treating Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)

Valid on 10/01/23

Please be aware that this is valid at point of release.
As new developments come in, the team will endeavour to update these materials.

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Understanding POPs

What are POPs

Persistent Organic Pollutants, more commonly known as 'POPs', are toxic chemicals that break down slowly and can eventually find ways into food chains as a result.

Not only can POPs ending up in food cause health problems for humans, but they also pose a threat to wildlife. The WWF confirmed that even small quantities of POPs can cause damage in animal tissue, resulting in damage to nervous systems, diseases of the immune system, reproductive and developmental disorders, and even cancers. You can find the full list of POPs and the threat they cause on the Gov.uk website, in this list.

Although the manufacturing and selling of products containing POPs is now banned in the United Kingdom, there are still items containing POPs out there that can unfortunately find ways into waste heading into the recycling system. Normally, this arrives from upholstered domestic waste being cleared out from old storage, however, it also remains a key issue when it comes to commercial waste.

Treating POPs

Under duty of care, the responsibility of identifying POPs in items of waste sits with the holder. This means that correct disposal routes become the responsibility of the holder too, making it imperative that all guidance surrounding POPs is both clear and concise.

The key focus on the specific waste streams that are being targeted to meet current POPs compliance:

· WEEE waste, including: -
    - Plastics
    - Cable
    - PC boards
    - Other products such as printer cartridges
· And soft furnishings, eg domestic seating

With the aim to destroy all POPs, the above waste streams are those that are most found containing POPs, and therefore, require incineration. Energy From Waste (EFW) remains the suggested solution to removing the risk of the chemicals being released into the environment, especially when they can remain intact for long periods of time.

Disposal guidance

Whilst incineration is the recommendation for all POPs to destroy the threat, our recommendation would be to consider the waste hierarchy and where possible, promote reuse before classifying items as waste. Not only does this extend the life of the resource, but it also provides benefit to local charities or the community that receive these second-hand items. Providing there is a fire label, and the item is in good condition, it should be considered for re-use over disposal.

However, reuse must be treated with the upmost care. Before confirming if the waste can be reused, Gov.uk states that all the following conditions for reuse must apply:

- It is reused for the same purpose for which it was designed
- The previous holder intended for it to be reused
- No more than minor repair is required to it when it is transferred from the previous holder to the new holder
- Both the previous holder and new holder know at the point of transfer that it does not need more than minor repair
- If a repair is required, it will be done
- Its use keeps to the law, for example it carries appropriate fire safety labels
- It is managed as a non-waste – that is, it is not moved or stored in a way that will damage it, for example in a skip with items of waste

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