

Waste zeitgeist

German Association for Waste management president Thomas Obermeier explains how waste went from being seen as a contaminant to a resource, why the UK risks again becoming the dirty man of Europe, and champions the leading role Germany can play in educating China and other countries. **Geraldine Faulkner** reports

The essential difference between speaking to a typical UK waste management specialist and someone such as Thomas Obermeier, president of the Germany Association for waste management (DGAW), is that while the former regards themselves solely as a UK citizen; Obermeier sees himself as a European.

It was in this spirit of cross border cooperation that *RWW* caught up with Obermeier just after he had returned fresh, exuberant – if a little tired – from IFAT (the Munich-based biennial trade fair for environmental technologies).

“IFAT with its 3,000 exhibitors and 120,000 visitors was exhausting,” admits the head of DGAW with a smile. “But very successful. The highlights of the show were the international guests who came to Munich to look for cooperation and the creation of more international business.”

In terms of international visitors Obermeier cites Asia and China in particular with its current five-year plan. A series of social and economic development initiatives that was started in 1953, the Asian behemoth is now in its 13th plan (2016–2020). The DGAW president clearly sees growing relations between China and Europe as a great opportunity for the Chinese to introduce better solutions into their waste management procedures as opposed to “just importing metal, paper and plastic scrap.”

Turning to Germany, which boasts 63–65% nationwide recycling rates, Obermeier gives a broad overview of how the 16 Bundesländer (federal states) operate waste collection.

“Nearly every city can choose its own system,” he explains before adding that as a result of the *Kreislaufwirtschaftsgesetz*, a nationwide recycling act which made the collection of biowaste mandatory in Germany from 2015, there is a separate collection of biowaste which is always picked up in brown bins, while residual waste is collected in grey bins. Packaging materials are collected in yellow bins or yellow bags. “This means that if you move from one state to another, you don’t have to change your environmental habits.”

The collection of residual waste is paid for by residents through the use of identification devices in bins, however, an option to choose smaller bins (for example, an 80L bin as opposed to a 120L bin) encourages householders to recycle more.

During the conversation with Obermeier, it soon becomes obvious that he rarely alludes to waste collection; instead the chartered engineer continuously refers to “the environment” and when the opportunity arises, to the Circular Economy.

Know-how and technology

“In the CE, we have 270,000 employees who turn over €70 billion. With a long tradition in the eco-economy, we have to see the CE as a business and one in which we can export our know-how and technology,” he emphasises. “It was in the late 1990s that the association was made in Germany between waste being connected to the environment and the CE.”

Obermeier points to the importance of support for the environment and the CE coming from the very top of Germany government.

“Our chancellor, Angela Merkel, was the minister for the environment, nature conservation and nuclear safety from 1994 to

1998 while Sigmar Gabriel, the leader of the German Labour Party, vice chancellor and minister of economics and trade, was minister for the environment from 2005 to 2009. That is one of the reasons why a lot of high-ranking politicians have the issue of the environment embedded into the German government,” states the head of DGAW, who is keen to stress the connection between climate protection, waste management and the CE.

“Before we went into the CE in 1990, the waste management sector emitted 39 million tonnes of carbon. This went down in 2013 to 13 million tonnes. Essentially, we were able to reduce our emissions by nearly 70% by closing landfill sites. I simply don’t understand why countries like the UK don’t do the same thing as this is low-hanging fruit in terms of ways of reducing emission rates. It is absurd,” he states emphatically.

While careful not to become embroiled in a discussion on the UK’s EU referendum, Obermeier can’t resist pointing out that were the UK to leave the EU [I will update this after 23 June]: “Nothing will change. The UK will have to spend 10 years negotiating the same laws you have in Norway and Switzerland; two countries who opted not to be member states of the EU.”

Thomas Obermeier CV

President of the Germany Association for Waste Management since 1998, Obermeier is the CEO of Berlin-based management consultancy, TOM M+C, which offers plant design and consultancy services to developers of landfills, composting facilities, anaerobic digestion plants, material recycling facilities, grate and fluidised bed incinerators. He is also vice chairman of the Bundesverband Sekundärrohstoffe und Entsorgung - Sonderabfall (Federal association for

secondary raw material and waste disposal – hazardous waste); a member of the Committee of Environment and Energy, Chamber of Industry and Commerce (IHK) Berlin; member of advisory board GUT cert (Certification body for management systems, environmental experts) and a permanent member of Wirtschaftsrat Deutschland - Bundesfachkommission Umweltpolitik (economic council Germany – Federal commission on environmental policy).



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Fact file: DGAW

Founded in 1990 to meet the needs of Germany's reunification, the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Abfallwirtschaft (DGAW) aims to be a platform for product responsibility and resource conservation.

According to the DGAW, its objective is to enhance both of these future-oriented fields by constructing a professional network and with this aim in mind the DGAW offers an interdisciplinary subject-oriented cooperation.

The various disciplines and professional groups, service- and solution providers, the client and the citizen as well as political and public authorities of various levels have the chance to actively participate in a brisk exchange of ideas towards the improvement of resource management.

With the support of its members, the DGAW plays a part in the processes of resource management on a social, political, legislative and technical level.

The DGAW stresses that it is not fighting for members' individual interests; instead it is working for higher standards in the waste industry. "We focus on the development and discussion of visions," says the Association.

The DGAW president enthusiastically embraces the new CE package that is currently under discussion, if only for measuring recycling rates across the EU.

"Under European law, four different statistical criteria are allowed to measure recycling at the moment. It is not a straightforward system; in fact it is very difficult. I think it would be a great approach if the EU used the same statistical method that is being proposed in the CE Package. This was one of the topics discussed at IFAT," recalls Obermeier.

Heat matters

Another issue that the DGAW head has with the UK waste management sector is energy from waste (EfW) that in 99.9% of cases only produces power and not heat.

"It is difficult for me to understand why the UK EfW industry only produces power. If you have EfW it makes sense to find someone to take your steam, whether it's industrial steam for paper mills or the food industry. If you do that, it makes for very high efficiency and it is a

pity that in the UK, you don't make use of the availability."

Obermeier points to the future and the role EfW plants will play in the energy mix.

"Energy from waste is already seen as a clean solution, especially compared to coal and gas, so when you look 10 years ahead into the future where electrical power will be produced mainly from wind and solar, this will make you the dirty guys," he warns before returning to his favourite topic.

"You have to understand that in the CE waste management is very closely linked to energy policy and the worldwide resource market. Whereas previously waste was perceived as a source of contamination along with smoke and air pollution and the imperative was to get it out of the cities and fast, now it is seen as a resource."

No wonder the Chinese, who currently suffer with high pollution rates in their cities, are keen to speak to waste management specialists in Germany.

"The Chinese want to buy the know-how of our waste management operations," says

Obermeier. "They are keen to acquire operational skills such as operating a facility in Germany with five people on a shift rather than 50 individuals and to achieve 8,000 hours a year instead of 5,000-6,000 hours. They can buy the technology, but they are keen to find out how to operate it."

Looking to the future, where does the DGAW president see waste management in Germany?

"It is looking good," he replies without hesitation. "If given the opportunity, here at the DGAW we intend to speak more in places like the UK, Singapore and Beijing.

"We have a duty to share knowledge and expertise as fast as possible so others don't make the same mistakes. For instance, the decision by Air Products to drop gasification; we made errors like that 15-20 years ago. We really have to share our experience and, importantly, we have to be honest so that others don't make the same mistakes that we made years ago."

Not just a true European, but indeed a worldwide citizen. **RWW**

Five things I can't live without...

Family

Without the love, regard and assistance of my family, I would not have been so successful in my work and my honorary posts



The environment

I get a kick out of admiring my garden, seeing the stars and the bats at night while sitting on my patio, as well as enjoying the mountains and the sea on my annual leaves

Good food and wine

Having grown up in Bavaria I'm a baroque style of guy and I love to drink good wine and enjoy excellent food with friends



Culture

My father was a musician and my grandfather a painter. Visiting concerts from classic music to rock, museums, architecture and cinemas continually remind me of mankind's creativeness



Exercise

Skiing in winter, swimming in summer and my weekly appointments at the gym help to keep me fit