

Unexpected treasures lie dormant in Belgian households

55 million unused electrical appliances could be recycled

The "European Week for Waste Prevention" is running this year until November 24. This initiative, which began in 2009 with a regional project of the EU environmental programme LIFE+, is now based on concrete actions in all member states, primarily by municipalities and non-governmental organizations. In Belgium, this includes Recupel, an association founded in 2001 that organizes the take-back and recycling of electrical and electronic equipment.

The reason for its foundation was the introduction of the take-back obligation for such appliances under EU law, starting with large household appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators, which was gradually extended to other product categories. The association's members are manufacturers and importers. In 2023, Recupel claims to have taken back almost 42 million appliances weighing 128,000 tons; 83% of these were recycled, mainly metals and plastics.

However, these figures are not the whole truth: they only include the quantities that "arrive" at Recupel. According to the latest available figures from the European statistics office Eurostat (2022), the proportion of electrical and electronic waste that is collected separately in Belgium is just under 50%, which is still better than the EU average of just under 40% and better than in neighboring countries Germany, France and the Netherlands. In 2022, 164,637 tons were collected in Belgium, which means that around 35,000 tons ended up at collection points other than Recupel (more detailed figures here). What happens to the other half of the waste, which is apparently not collected separately, is not recorded (at least statistically). Much of it may end up in "normal" waste or in landfill sites in Africa.

The "collection rate" is defined by EU law as the proportion of separately collected waste electrical and electronic equipment in relation to the average weight of new equipment placed on the market in the previous three years. The proportion should be 45% in 2016 and increase to 65% by 2019. No Member State has achieved this self-imposed target. It was not until 2022 that 16 member states achieved the 45% quota or remained just below it.

Recupel used the campaign week to present a study that draws attention to the dormant reserves of recyclable materials in Belgian households: around 55 million electrical appliances are lying around unused in Belgian households. Recupel illustrates how enormous this amount is: it could fill the Tour Bastion at the Porte de Namur in Brussels eight times over or the Boerentoren in Antwerp five times over. During the campaign week, frescoes of piled-up appliances will be projected onto the facades of these two towers to raise public awareness of the issue.

In 2024, Belgian households contained a total of around 549 million electrical and electronic appliances, i.e. an average of 106 per household (compared to 78 in 2019). This includes two electronic toys, 10 computer and telecommunications devices and 14 electronic devices in the kitchen.

On average, 12 existing appliances are no longer used. These include fairy lights, bicycle or flashlights, electronic toys, extension leads and old cell phones. Some still work, others are broken. The study investigated why people don't take them away. "This means that valuable raw materials such as metals, plastics or glass are lost to recycling," says Eric Dewaet, head of Recupel. Consistent recycling could also reduce problematic mining or illegal disposal abroad.

Most respondents say that there are not enough incentives to hand in appliances or think that they could perhaps be repaired after all. For others, the whole thing is simply "too complicated". This is

particularly likely to be the case if the device was purchased online and then possibly abroad. 12 percent of respondents do not know where electrical appliances can be handed in - and 8 percent do not even know that broken electrical appliances can be recycled. Almost 14 percent have also disposed of appliances with normal household waste, which can lead to environmental problems when incinerated.

Recupel is calling on the public to bring back appliances that are no longer used. This can be done at municipal recycling parks, for example, where Recupel often has collection points. Recupel is also sometimes present at weekly markets or organizes take-back or repair offers. Broken appliances can also be handed in at some stores or supermarkets, not just where they were bought.

As you can see, there is still a lot to be done to ensure that electrical and electronic waste does not pollute the environment and is instead used as a valuable source of raw materials for the development of a sustainable circular economy.

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