

News

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A Comprehensive Policy Regarding Waste Disposal Needs to be Formulated



Iceland was exempted from the EU directive on the incineration of waste. The National Audit Office considers that the Ministry for the Environment has not conformed to the requirements of the exemption in a sufficiently purposeful manner. It is vital that the Environment Agency of Iceland applies its legal authority in order to ensure that waste incineration plants conform to set regulations.

The National Audit Office's latest report covers the implementation of regulations concerning waste incineration plants in Iceland and how their operations are monitored. In 2000, the EU issued a directive which included the introduction of stricter regulations than before regarding maximum emissions of polluting substances into the atmosphere from waste incineration plants. Because of Iceland's membership of the European Economic Area (EEA), the Icelandic government was required to implement the directive. However, the authorities requested that working waste incinerator plants in Iceland should be exempted from the provisions of the directive because pollution from them was at low levels and the cost of meeting the requirements would be excessive. The EU concurred with this view, and in 2003, seven waste incinerator plants received permanent exemption. Only two of them remain in operation, at Svinafell, Kirkjubæjarklaustur and Vestmannaeyjar.

The exemption from the provisions of the directive was granted with three conditions. In the first place, the relevant waste incinerator plants had to measure annual emissions of specified pollutants and fulfil the provisions of an older EU directive which had been implemented in Iceland. In the second place, the plants had to measure emissions of poisonous dioxins on a single occasion, and in the third place, the exemption was to be reviewed after five years, when less expensive technology would allow the plants to meet the requirements of the directive.

The National Audit Office considers that the Ministry for the Environment has not conformed to the requirements of the exemption in a sufficiently purposeful manner. Nor has the Ministry ensured that unclear aspects of the requirements were explained.

In the opinion of the National Audit Office, the Ministry needs to prioritise the formulation of a comprehensive policy regarding waste disposal in Iceland based on the results of research and professional assessments. Among other things, an assessment needs to be made of whether waste incinerator plants should continue operations, and whether the national government should participate in their development to a greater or lesser extent.

The National Audit Office believes that it is vital that the Environment Agency of Iceland applies its legal authority in order to ensure that waste incineration plants conform to laws and regulations. The Environment Agency should always make a professional evaluation of the results of pollution measurements and pass the information on to the plant operators, the Ministry and the public. The report states that the Environment Agency has recently changed its modus operandi and tightened its monitoring of all types of polluting operations.

The report also states that the Ministry for the Environment did not take the initiative in reviewing the exemption as it was obliged to in the opinion of the National Audit Office. However, the Environment Agency has now proposed that the exemption should be revoked from the end of 2012.

In addition to criticising the authorities for not fulfilling the requirements of the exemption sufficiently well, the National Audit Office points out that the request for exemption was not supported well enough with documentation.

