

Landfill fires - stop pathologies in waste management

Recently, the number of waste fires has increased. The Ministry of Environment recognises the importance of the problem and has prepared proposals for solutions to prevent such situations from happening in the future. These concern, among others, strengthening the landfill control mechanisms.

This year we have been observing a significant increase in the number of fires at waste storage sites compared to previous years. Only in the last week, landfills burnt down in Warsaw, Olsztyn, Zgierz, Trzebinia, Jelenia Góra and Wszedzień.

The direct causes of the fires are still being investigated. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that at least in the case of illegal waste storage sites (Zgierz, Trzebinia and Wszedzień), intentional arson in order to dispose of the waste may have occurred.

“Landfill fires are not just a local problem. This is a serious social problem, related to the environment and health care”, said Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki.

“These actions seem to be coordinated, as these cases of arson have taken place in a very short time span. There are all indications to suggest that these events are not random and that we are dealing with a number of offences,” he added.

During the conference, Prime Minister Morawiecki also spoke about reporting the case to the Internal Security Agency and the Attorney General.

What changes?

Work on changes to the law on waste storage has been ongoing at the Ministry of Environment for several months now. Today (29 May 2018), during the meeting of the Council of Ministers, Minister Henryk Kowalczyk presented proposals for possible legislative actions to be implemented in order to reduce the phenomenon of waste fires.

“The experience of recent days shows that we are dealing with a very dangerous phenomenon, which is why we are proposing a number of legislative solutions aimed at preventing it. We want to introduce much stricter requirements for waste management companies,” said Henryk Kowalczyk, the Minister of Environment.

Minister Kowalczyk stressed that these solutions comprise, among other things, introducing financial guarantees for entities managing waste with regard to collection, storage and treatment of waste. In this way, if waste is abandoned, local authorities would have the means to manage it.

Another proposal concerns the requirement to implement video monitoring of waste storage facilities. This will facilitate the supervision of waste management activities and, in the event of a fire, help to identify the cause and possible perpetrators of the incident.

Minister Kowalczyk also pointed out that one of the proposed solutions was to limit the permissible storage period for waste from 3 years to 1 year and to introduce the requirement for the facilities to obtain approvals for their commissioning based on the opinion of the State Fire Service before commencing waste management activities.

The Ministry of Environment also proposed the introduction of criteria for administrative penalties for the illegal collection, storage and processing of waste. Currently, the administrative penalty imposed by the Voivodeship Inspectorates of Environmental Protection ranges from PLN 1,000 to PLN 1,000,000.

Minister Kowalczyk stressed that the legislative solutions must also include sanctions for repeat offenders - entities that suffered from the fires multiple times.

The issue of the authority of starosts to issue decisions on waste collection, storage and processing is also being considered, with the possibility of transferring the authority to issue these decisions to other authorities.

“Every effort should be made to eliminate this seemingly illegal practice. In cooperation with the Ministry of Environment, the State Fire Service and the Police, we will prepare concrete proposals for effective solutions to this problem,” stressed Joachim Brudziński, Minister of the Interior and Administration.

Strengthening the Environmental Protection Inspectorate

The Ministry of Environment also pointed out the need to strengthen the powers of the Environmental Protection Inspectorate by waiving the requirement to give seven days' notice of the intention to carry out an audit.

Scale of fires

The State Fire Service confirms the worrying increase in statistics on fires in such facilities: 59 in 2010, around 100 in 2013 and 2014, and 130 and 150 in 2016 and 2017, respectively. In 2018, we saw about 60 fires already.

The last fires were characterised by a large scale and differentiation of locations. Each time, the firefighting operations required participation of several dozen units (about 50 in Warsaw, more than 60 fire brigades in Trzebinia and Zgierz, and additionally, two planes in Trzebinia). In the village of Wszedzień, it was necessary to evacuate the inhabitants.

