

The biogas sector in Flanders, Belgium: what's new in 2015?

The biogas sector in Flanders has an important economical and societal added value. The societal task of the sector, i.e. contribute to the realization of the European renewable energy and climate targets, is clear. In addition the sector not only produces green power, but also an important share of green heat. Moreover, the sector has many additional functions related to waste management, nutrient processing and employment. In comparison with other environmental and energy generating technologies, this sector does create local employment and a symbiosis with the Flemish economy, among others via the waste sector, consultancy companies, construction companies, research centers and analytical laboratories. In this way most of the support for green power and heat is reinjected in the Flemish economy.

At the end of 2014, there were 40 large-scale digesters in Flanders, with a total permitted capacity of 2,587,000 ton/year and a total installed power of 104.19 MWe. The number of operational digesters has been stagnating in recent years, with a steady number of around 39-40 large-scale agricultural, industrial and domestic organic waste installations since 2012. New installations have been starting up, but unfortunately as many installations have been shut down, or are in stand-by because of a take-over. These figures highlight again that the sector finds itself in heavy weather, among others because a profitable exploitation proves impossible without a correct subvention.

The total gross energy production from biogas in Flanders in 2014 was 700 GWh. This is an increase of 86 GWh compared to 2013, representing a 14% rise. Despite the fact that the number of digesters stagnates, the output continues to increase, which means that the digesters are working more efficiently and make better use of their installed capacity. Various factors have contributed over the past couple of years to an increased insecurity and lower financial returns: (i) availability of biomass and raise of raw material prices, (ii) more difficult marketing of and higher costs for processing digestate, (iii) lower commodity prices for electricity on the Energy index, (iv) insufficient governmental support for green energy from biogas.

Also in the coming years, Biogas-E commits itself to the following key points:

- The 10-year support period is too short. Although there is a possibility to apply for an extension, the procedure for that is unclear and is initiated too late. Past experience has shown that it is difficult to survive without support. This situation is worrying for the biogas sector.
- Biogas-E clarifies upon request the extension procedure to operators.
- Active follow-up of the subvention mechanisms for biomethane. Flemish policy makers are sincerely interested in using biomethane to make the transport sector more sustainable. The Energy Cabinet has requested Biogas-E (as coordinator of the working group on biomethane) and FeBiGa to gauge interest within the transport sector and proposed Biogas-E to coordinate a demo project.