Used sandbags

Advice for local authorities

28 February 2014

Are used sandbags waste?

• If the intention is to re-use sandbags they are not waste and there are no environmental permitting requirements.

• However, if a decision is made to discard sandbags, for example if they are contaminated, damaged or surplus to requirements, then they are waste and need to be recycled or disposed of safely.

• Sandbags become waste at the point the decision is made to discard them. If householders decide to discard them, they will normally seek advice from their local authority on any local arrangements for collection or disposal. Please see the advice below on establishing temporary collection points.

What are the recycling and disposal options for waste sandbags?

• Re-use of sandbags is the simplest and most sustainable option and is encouraged wherever possible. No environmental permitting controls apply.

• If re-use is not possible, then there are a number of recycling or recovery options that are available. Disposal to landfill is also available, but is the least preferable option.

• Recycling, recovery or disposal of waste usually requires an environmental permit or an exemption. There are existing waste facilities which are available to manage this type of waste.

• The level of contamination (mainly faecal and oil) will be a factor when considering these options. Sand and bags contaminated with hazardous substances, such as oil, are likely to need disposing of as hazardous waste. We don't expect there to be many like this.

• Uncontaminated bags made of compostable material such as hessian can be composted. Those made of non-compostable materials such as polypropylene, should be recycled if possible, or disposed by incineration or landfill.

• Sand can be recovered in a variety of ways at sites currently operating under a permit or exemption. It can be used as daily cover on landfills, in construction projects or in one of the many permitted reclamation or restoration schemes around the country. All these options are likely to remain viable even if the sand is moderately contaminated below hazardous waste thresholds.

• Sand is not biodegradable so should not be added to a composting process, but it may be possible to blend with compost at the end of the process depending on the level of contamination.

• Sand that is clean may be used to re-fill new sandbags or in some cases be spread on agricultural land provided that it is done to provide agricultural benefit, but there are likely to be more beneficial uses at existing permitted or exempt sites.

Temporary collection points

• We understand local authorities may want to consider setting up temporary collection points in some areas where lots of bags have been used. Collection points would normally need an Environmental Permit if they are taking discarded sandbags. However, the Environment Agency will provide a Regulatory Position Statement to allow these temporary sites to operate without the need for a permit, provided that:

  o Discarded sandbags are stored in a secure place*
Discarded sandbags contaminated with hazardous substances are segregated and stored either in secure containers or in an area with impermeable pavement and sealed drainage.

Discarded sandbags are stored for no longer than 3 months at a temporary collection point.

- Sandbags should either be taken to the collection point by the holder or collected by the local authority or by a third party approved by the local authority.

* A place is secure in relation to waste kept in it if -
  (a) all reasonable precautions are taken to ensure that the waste cannot escape from it, and
  (b) members of the public are unable to gain access to the waste