Background Paper - Youth Session at the ECESP Annual Conference 2026

Youth perspectives on the forthcoming Circular Economy Act: the floor is yours!
(22 April 2026, 15:45–17:15, Brussels & online)

1. Why this youth session?

The perspectives of young people really matter when it comes to shaping the transition ahead. The special session at the Annual Conference of the European Circular Economy Stakeholder Platform (ECESP) is your chance to share your experiences, ideas and views, and be part of the shift towards a more circular economy.

Europe needs to move away from today's "take–make–waste" model where resources are extracted, used, and thrown away, towards a circular economy, where resources are used more wisely, waste is reduced, and materials stay in use for as long as possible. This shift will reduce the EU's dependence on imported raw materials, lower costs and risks for businesses, and give consumers access to products that are more sustainable and don't break. That is why the European Commission is preparing a Circular Economy Act (CEA), for adoption in the second half of 2026.

Young people aged 15–29 will live with the medium and long-term consequences of today's decisions on the use of natural resources, climate action, jobs and industrial transformation. This dedicated youth session at the ECESP 2026 conference, along with the written youth consultation before the conference, is a space for you to speak up, share what matters to you, and contribute meaningfully to the policy debate.

What you share won't just stay in the room: the results of the questionnaire and the session will feed into the Impact Assessment Report[1] underpinning the CEA.

2. What should the Circular Economy Act (CEA) do?

Europe is often considered a resource-poor continent - many important resources we rely on for production cannot be found on our continent. Not only do we depend on imports of oil, gas and coal to produce our energy, but we lack many raw materials to manufacture goods we use daily, such as smartphones, computers, batteries and cars. As a result, we depend on imports from countries that are often politically unstable. This makes us vulnerable and creates challenges for European policymakers. At the same time, important amounts of such materials are already present in products we use and later, in the waste we generate. These materials can be recovered and recycled. But waste can also be a dangerous legacy that can

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[1] Impact assessments are studies that help decide what action the EU should take on certain issues, by looking at the likely outcomes of different policy options. These studies are carried out before the European Commission finalises a proposal for a new law.

contaminate the environment and pose risks to human health. Therefore, it needs to be managed carefully.

The CEA is an EU initiative designed to make it easier for companies to trade, transport and use materials recycled from waste across the Single Market[2], while making circular solutions more affordable and widespread across the EU. For example, your old smart phone contains lots of valuable materials, such as gold, copper and aluminium, which can be recycled and used again to produce new appliances.

The CEA will build on existing EU policies and legislation to support the circular transition, including waste recycling targets and ecodesign requirements[3] for products. Despite these initiatives, progress towards circularity has been slow. Over the last decade, the EU's circular material use rate (the share of materials consumed in the EU that come from recycling) has barely increased. Today, it sits around 12%, meaning that nearly 88% of the materials we use are virgin. The goal is to double this to 24% by 2030. The CEA is intended to speed up this progress, by improving the supply of high-quality recycled materials, boosting their use in products and buildings, and ensuring they can move freely between EU countries.

Improving recycling and resource use will strengthen Europe's competitiveness. Recycled materials require far less energy to process - for example, recycled aluminum uses only 5-10% of the energy needed for processing virgin aluminium. It will also reduce risks for industry, such as being cut off from imported raw materials due to trade wars, armed conflicts, or pandemics. At the same time, it will help us reduce greenhouse gas emissions, as 65% of these emissions are generated by mining and processing of virgin materials.

3. What kind of measures might achieve this?

The Commission is still considering and assessing what measures to propose in the CEA, but these might include:

- Setting clear and common quality criteria for recycled materials, so companies can trade them more easily across borders and users can reply on their quality and performance. This will help recycled materials compete more fairly with virgin materials.
- Extending rules on the recovery and treatment of waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE)[4] - such as phones, laptops, tablets, game consoles, chargers and headphones - to cover more recent products such as wind turbines and heat pumps, so that they can be reused or recycled. WEEE contains many valuable and critical raw materials that we need for new products, and for which we depend on imports from other countries, such as China and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

[2] The EU Single Market is a partnership among EU countries that makes it easier for people, goods, services, and money to move across their borders without restrictions.
[3] Ecodesign involves designing everyday things—like clothes, electronics, or furniture—in a way that uses fewer resources, lasts longer, and can be recycled.
[4] E-waste, as per EU legislation, refers to any product with a plug, an electric cord or battery, which is dependent on or generates some electric current. This includes for example fridges, TVs or mobile phones.

- Increasing the demand for recycled materials, by requiring producers to include a minimum amount in new products (for example, plastic drinks bottles must already contain 25% recycled plastic).
- Boosting demand for circular products by encouraging public authorities to buy them. For example, this could mean requiring police uniforms or hospital sheets to contain recycled fibres or allowing schools to purchase second-hand refurbished desks and computers.
- Using economic incentives to reduce the amount of waste that is burned in incinerators or buried in landfills, making recycling a more attractive option.
- Reducing exports of waste to places where it will not be managed in environmentally and socially good conditions.
- Making more producers responsible for covering the costs of dealing with their products when they become waste. Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes[5] already cover packaging and electronic and electrical equipment but could be extended to other products. These systems could also be made simpler, for example by digitising or harmonising them.

The CEA mainly focuses on improving the EU's Single Market for recycled products. Other aspects of the circular economy, such as designing products to last longer, making them easier to repair and recycle, and promoting reuse, are not part of the CEA. These measures are already addressed in other legislation.

6. Why does this matter to you?

A stronger circular economy will

- **Create new jobs at all skills levels** by opening up opportunities, particularly in recycling, repair, re-use and sustainable design of products and buildings.

- **Reduce the cost of living**: more durable and repairable products are cheaper over their lifecycle.

- **Improve health**: by cutting pollution, it will contribute to cleaner air, water, and overall quality of life.

- **Reduce environmental impacts**: by reducing overall use of materials in products, and use of energy-intensive materials.

- **Drive innovation and entrepreneurship**: it supports start-ups, SMEs and new business models focused on sustainable solutions.

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[5] Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, is a policy that requires companies to take responsibility for the entire life cycle of their products, including their disposal after consumers are done using them. This means that producers must manage waste and recycling, making sure their products don't harm the environment once they've been thrown away.

- **Strengthen Europe's long-term economic and environmental security**: it reduces Europe's reliance on imported raw materials and builds resilience for the future.

In addition, young people have a key role to play as consumers and citizens in making the circular economy a reality. Your daily choices and actions help shape the future of resources, products and waste in Europe.

7. For whom?

Everyone aged between 15 – 29, interested in a sustainable future and committed to democratic participation is invited to fill out the questionnaire and participate in the Youth Session at the ECESP conference in person or online. The conference requires registration. You can register by following the link: A competitive and Fair Circular Europe.

8. How can you contribute?

If you are between 15-29, you can:

- Answer the questionnaire till **12 April** and / or hand in ideas or short papers by writing to ENV-CEA-YOUTH-CONSULTATION@ec.europa.eu

- Actively engage in the **youth session discussion** during the ESESP Annual Conference on **22 April**, online or in person (registration required: A competitive and Fair Circular Europe)

- Submit additional written contributions after the conference, **by 29 April**, by writing to ENV-CEA-YOUTH-CONSULTATION@ec.europa.eu

Thank you for your contribution! All inputs received will help inform the Commission's work on the Impact Assessment underpinning the CEA.

If you want to stay informed about latest developments of the CEA, visit the following webpage Circular Economy - Environment - European Commission.