

Overprocurement: Germany Has Billions of Corona Masks Too Many, Now They Are Being Burned

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The people in charge have found a term that should at least suggest some meaning: thermal recycling. Four federal states state that they have thermally recycled a total of 17.25 million expired corona masks. Translated this means: They were burned.

This is the result of a WELT survey of all countries. 6.1 million masks were destroyed in Baden-Württemberg, 5.5 million in Saxony, five million in North Rhine-Westphalia and 656,000 in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania. Eleven federal states announced that they had not yet disposed of any corona masks, but that they were partially planning to do so. Thuringia could not provide any information about the type of recycling.

The Federal Ministry of Health (BMG) in Berlin has also "energetically recycled" masks in the past few months. The number is so far "less than a million pieces," said a spokesman on request. The destroyed masks were bought at the height of the pandemic. They have passed their sell-by date without a buyer having been found for them beforehand. At federal and state level, the majority were surgical, FFP2 and similar masks.

In October last year it was announced that the federal government wants to dispose of up to 800 million expired masks. According to WELT information, this was taken over by the disposal company Remondis in the Euskirchen warehouse in North Rhine-Westphalia. According to documents, November 11, 2022 to November 30, 2023 was agreed as the period. "Energy recovery" is also to take place at the storage locations in Augsburg, Dresden and Crailsheim in the district of Schwäbisch-Hall.

The federal and state governments are sitting on a mountain of masks worth billions. According to the Federal Ministry of Health from September, there are a total of 3.7 billion masks in the federal inventory, around 20 percent of which are the subject of legal disputes and cannot be handed over. According to a spokesman on Tuesday, 1.4 billion certified surgical masks and 260 million FFP2 masks can currently be delivered. Most of these will last until the end of next year.

“I’m often the only mask wearer in the room”

As a sign that the pandemic is not over, Health Minister Lauterbach also wears a mask at the World Economic Forum. He wants to set an example. So far it hasn’t made school: “I’m often the only mask wearer in the room,” he says in the WELT interview with Jan Philipp Burgard.

In addition, the federal states have a total of 180 million corona masks, as the responsible health and interior ministries announced on request. Bavaria (68.5 million), Lower Saxony (24.6 million) and Hesse (22.6 million) stock the most masks. In twelve federal states, a total of 54.3 million of the masks will expire this year or next. These are mostly medical surgical masks.

You can only burn what you bought yourself

Several ministries want to have more masks destroyed in the future. The problem: So far you can only burn those that you have bought yourself. For masks that were procured by the federal government and then distributed to the federal states, they need the approval of the federal government.

“The Hessian Ministry of the Interior and Sport, together with many ministries from other states, is turning to the federal government with an urgent request to either take back the unusable protective masks from federal deliveries or to agree to their destruction by the states, as ongoing storage costs are incurred,” says a spokesman. Unfortunately, approval has not yet been obtained. “The Federal Ministry of Health refers to open customs issues that have not yet been clarified by the Federal Government.”

The Ministry of the Interior in Saxony also reports that it is waiting for the masks procured by the federal government “until legal questions have been finally clarified”. The Saarland announced that it planned to destroy 1.8 million masks from the federal inventory. A spokesman for the Health Senate in Hamburg says: “The preparations have been made.” When asked when approval can be given, a spokesman for the Federal Ministry of Health answered evasively: “The BMG is in regular contact with both the federal states and the General Customs Directorate.”

Karsten Klein, chairman of the FDP parliamentary group in the budget committee of the Bundestag, criticizes the previous government’s overprocurement: “The traffic light coalition inherited a huge and very expensive mask mountain from Jens Spahn. As important as the federal government’s support for the procurement of masks was at times in 2020, under Spahn it resulted in a real buying spree that completely lost sight of the need,” said Klein about the former Federal Minister of Health from the CDU.

In future crises, procurement must be based on reliable demand forecasts and there must be better coordination between the federal and state governments. “There must be no immense over-procurement and thus a waste of taxpayers’ money.” The Federal Ministry of Health must now “at all costs” look for ways to give away masks before their shelf life expires. Depending on the mask type and manufacturer, this is usually between two and five years.

Kathrin Vogler, health policy spokeswoman for the Left Group in the Bundestag, also criticizes the destruction: “Instead of distributing leftover masks to people free of charge at

train and bus stations or in doctor's offices, the federal states and the Ministry of Health are now destroying millions of masks." This shows that those responsible have not even begun to understand the social dimension of infection control. "Prevention measures such as masks and tests must be available to everyone with low thresholds and as free of charge as possible."

Almost six billion euros in procurement costs in the federal government alone

At the beginning of November, the Budget Committee of the Bundestag called on the government to ensure that the personal protective equipment in the federal inventory "is definitely recycled as needed before the expiry date expires" and that options for free and fee-based disposal are also examined in order to ensure disposal "to be avoided due to exceeding the expiry date".

In addition, masks are stored in addition to the federal inventory as part of the "National Health Protection Reserve". The establishment of the reserve was decided by the then federal government in mid-2020 in order to prevent future shortages. According to the Ministry of Health, there are currently 245 million masks in reserve, some of which will expire at the end of 2023.

But doubts about the usefulness of the reserve are increasing. In November, the budget committee asked the government to implement a proposal from the Federal Court of Auditors and to examine "whether physical storage for the federal healthcare system is necessary and economical at all" and at which authority this should best be located - as well as what alternatives to one Stockpiling at the federal government may exist.

Overall, mask procurement is a very expensive affair for the taxpayer. The costs at federal level alone have totaled 5.8 billion euros since the beginning of the pandemic. For this purpose, 4.2 billion surgical masks and 1.7 billion FFP2 masks were procured.

In the past, the Federal Court of Auditors has repeatedly criticized that under the leadership of ex-Health Minister Spahn, there was a "massive over-procurement" of masks that would have been "avoidable".

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