



Single-use plastics: New EU rules to reduce marine litter

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Questions & Answers

Why is the Commission proposing a new Directive to tackle marine litter?

More than 80% of marine litter is plastics. The European Commission is proposing new EU-wide rules that target the 10 single-use plastic products most often found on Europe's beaches and seas, as well as lost and abandoned fishing gear. These products are the biggest part of the problem. Together they constitute 70% of all marine litter items.

Due to its slow decomposition, plastic accumulates in seas, oceans and on beaches in the EU and worldwide. Plastic residues are found in marine species – such as sea turtles, seals, whales and birds, but also in fish and shellfish, and therefore in the human food chain. While plastics are a convenient, adaptable, useful and economically valuable material, they need to be better used, re-used and recycled. When littered, the economic impact of plastics encompasses not just the lost economic value in the material, but also the costs of cleaning up and losses for tourism, fisheries and shipping.

The Commission is proposing a comprehensive set of measures to address this problem. The Single Use Plastics Directive is an integral part of the wider approach announced in the [Plastics Strategy](#) and an important element of the [Circular Economy Action Plan](#). It builds on the successful reduction in consumption of single use plastic carrier bags brought about by EU legislation in 2014, and on the newly revised [EU waste legislation](#), which includes targets for the recycling of plastics.

Replacing the most common single use plastic items with innovative alternatives that have higher added-value is an economic opportunity. It can create around 30,000 local jobs. Multiple-use or better-designed products can build on the EU's lead in the bioeconomy, as well as innovative business models and systems, like re-use schemes. Horizon 2020 has provided more than €250 million to finance R&D in areas of direct relevance for the Plastics Strategy. Between now and 2020, an additional €100 million will be devoted to financing priority actions under this Strategy, including on the development of smarter and more recyclable plastics materials, more efficient recycling processes and the removal of hazardous substances and contaminants from recycled plastics.

This legislation will offer the clarity, certainty and economies of scale needed for investment and innovation in the Single Market. And it will eliminate uncertainty for business in the face of national measures which some Member States have taken to ban certain single use plastic items. By acting at European level we avoid market fragmentation and ensure a level playing field. Through this proposal Europe is meeting its commitments at global level to tackle marine litter originating from Europe.

What will be the impact of this Directive on marine litter?

Implementation of this proposal will aim to reduce littering by more than half for the ten single use plastic items, avoiding environmental damage which would otherwise cost €223 billion by 2030. It will also avoid the emission of 3.4 million tonnes of CO₂ equivalent by 2030.

What are the main elements of the Commission proposal?

This is a targeted and proportionate initiative that directly addresses the top sources of marine litter in Europe - the **top ten single use plastic items** found on EU beaches; and **abandoned, lost and disposed of fishing gear** - which together constitute 70% of all marine litter items.

The proposal tackles the root causes of the problem. That means looking at how these items are produced, distributed and used by businesses and consumers, how they are disposed of, and how some of them end up on beaches, in seas and oceans.

The following sets of measures are proposed, corresponding to the characteristics of each single-use plastic item:

- **Plastic ban of certain products:** Where alternatives are readily available and affordable, single-use plastic products will be banned from the market. The ban will apply to plastic cotton buds, cutlery, plates, straws, drink stirrers and balloon sticks which will all have to be made exclusively from more sustainable materials instead. Single-use drinks containers made with plastic will only

be allowed on the market if their caps and lids remain attached;

- **Consumption reduction targets:** Member States will have to reduce the use of plastic food containers and drinks cups. They can do so by setting national reduction targets, making alternative products available at the point of sale, or ensuring that single-use plastic products cannot be provided free of charge;
- **Obligations for producers:** Producers will help cover the costs of waste management and clean-up, as well as awareness raising measures for food containers, packets and wrappers (such as for crisps and sweets), drinks containers and cups, tobacco products with filters (such as cigarette butts), wet wipes, balloons, and lightweight plastic bags. The industry will also be given incentives to develop less polluting alternatives for these products;
- **Collection targets:** Member States will be obliged to collect 90% of single-use plastic drinks bottles by 2025, for example through deposit refund schemes;
- **Labelling Requirements:** Certain products will require a clear and standardised labelling which indicates how waste should be disposed, the negative environmental impact of the product, and the presence of plastics in the products. This will apply to sanitary towels, wet wipes and balloons;
- **Awareness-raising measures:** Member States will be obliged to raise consumers' awareness about the negative impact of littering of single-use plastics and fishing gear as well as about the available re-use systems and waste management options for all these products.

Single-use plastic items	Consumption reduction	Market restriction	Product design requirement	Marking requirements	Extended producer responsibility	Separate collection objective	Awareness raising measures
Food containers	X				X		X
Cups for beverages	X				X		X
Cotton bud sticks		X					
Cutlery, plates, stirrers, straws		X					
Sticks for balloons		X					
Balloons				X	X		X
Packets & wrappers					X		X
Beverage containers, their caps & lids - Beverage bottles			X		X		X
			X		X	X	X
Tobacco product filters					X		X
Sanitary items: - Wet wipes				X	X		X
- Sanitary towels				X			X

Lightweight plastic carrier bags					X		X
Fishing gear					X		X

How did the Commission identify the products to target?

The proposal focuses on the 10 single-use plastic items most found on European beaches, which represent 86% of all single-use plastic items on beaches, and about half of all plastic marine litter.

The Joint Research Centre of the Commission collected and processed the data in the context of the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, and building on work of the four regional sea conventions and a Technical Group on marine litter. A representative sample was used covering 276 beaches of 17 EU Member States and 4 Regional Seas during 2016. The 355,671 items observed were ranked by their abundance. The results take into account other monitoring exercises and conclude that the top 10 of the most found items has been stable over the years and across the different regional seas.

I'm a producer of single-use plastics. Will I have to pay for clean-up and recycling costs?

Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR) schemes are in line with the polluter-pays principle, an obligation set under the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Article 191(2) TFEU). EPR schemes are already well established for packaging, where producers agree to contribute. With the newly adopted EU waste legislation in May 2018, EPR is mandatory for all packaging. These EPR schemes may include litter clean-up costs.

Today's legislative proposal provides that producers of the most littered plastic items have to cover clean-up costs. These producers have a responsibility to contribute to clean-up and recycling costs, as they are contributing to the problem upstream with their production methods. Currently, the costs of littering of single-use plastic items are met by the public sector - ultimately by tax payers - but also by other private actors such as the tourism and fisheries industries which are strongly affected by marine litter.

What will change for fishing gear containing plastic?

Abandoned, lost or disposed fishing gear represents around 27% of marine litter items: the equivalent of over 11,000 tons per year. Fishing gear is designed to catch fish and will continue to do so even if lost ("ghost fishing"), causing particular damage to the marine environment. It is designed to be durable in the marine environment and may take hundreds of years to degrade. At the same time, the plastic used for fishing gear has a very high recycling potential, but the current recycling market is rather small and much localised.

This proposal aims to 'close the loop' for fishing gear by introducing an Extended Producer Responsibility scheme for gear containing plastic. The objective is to make sure that the cost of managing discarded plastic fishing gear, once it has arrived on shore, is taken care of by the producers of plastic fishing gear parts, and not by the ports. Fishermen and artisanal makers of fishing gear containing plastic will not be covered by the Extended Producer Responsibility scheme. More information available [here](#).

Does this proposal tackle the challenge of microplastics?

A high proportion of the microplastics in our oceans result from fragmentation of bigger pieces of plastic, so reducing plastic litter will reduce the presence of microplastics.

Some microplastics are intentionally added to products (for example in cosmetics, paints or detergents), and the Commission has separately started work to restrict these by requesting the European Chemicals Agency to review the scientific basis for considering a restriction under the EU chemicals legislation. The same process is under way for so-called oxo-degradable plastics.

Other microplastics end up in the ocean due to product use (for example dust from tyre wear and or washing textiles), or from primary plastic production (for example, spills of pre-production plastic pellets). The Commission will tackle this type of pollution through standardised methods for measuring the quantities of microplastics emitted, better labelling, possible regulatory measures, and increased capture through waste water treatment. For pellets, we will ensure dissemination of best practices for companies with plastic pellets and consider a mandatory certification scheme throughout the supply chain.

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