

MARINE DEBRIS – A GLOBAL PROBLEM NEEDING EU LEADERSHIP



The continued accumulation of litter in the marine environment is now considered a major threat to marine biodiversity. A staggering 6.4 million tonnes of marine litter is dumped in oceans every year, where it may fragment but does not biodegrade, persisting for hundreds or thousands of years.¹ Once there it can entangle or be ingested by a wide range of species, causing injuries, increasing chemical pollutant loads.² Millions of marine animals are dying each year to feed our demand for plastics.³



According to a report in 2012, marine debris impacts have been reported for over 600 marine species, a shocking 40% increase since 1997.⁴

The severity of the global impacts of marine debris on biodiversity and the urgent need for action has been recognised by the Convention on Biodiversity and was identified as a priority action at the 2013 Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. Action on plastic bags was called for by Japan, China and South Korea at the 2008 G8 summit where ministers agreed to the 'Kobe 3R Action Plan', including taking concrete actions to reduce the use of disposable plastic bags and other single use consumer products.⁵

EU leadership

The EU accounts for 25% of the world's plastic production⁶ and therefore has the responsibility to take a leadership role in reducing environmental impacts of plastics on our environment. A ban on single-use bags is

an effective and achievable first step in addressing the issue of plastic waste.

Single use plastic bags are a significant component of marine debris. Research by Surfrider Europe found that they are the third most common type of litter found on European beaches, lakes and rivers. Since their first use in the 1970s, single use plastic bags are now ubiquitous. More than eight billion plastic bags end up as litter across the EU each year.⁷

The success of bans on single-use bags has already been demonstrated worldwide, including in Tanzania, China, Bangladesh, India, Taiwan, South Africa, Rwanda and South Australia.⁸ Moreover, EU consultations have demonstrated strong public support for such measures, with 70% of EU citizens supportive of a European ban or levy on single-use plastic bags.⁹

In the UK there is also overwhelming public support, with over 90% of people asked by London Councils responding that they wanted either a levy or an outright ban.¹⁰ UK retailers are similarly supportive of a levy or ban, calling for measures that are consistent across countries and apply to all retailers regardless of size, and all types of bags in order to provide a clear and simple message to consumers and achieve the maximum environmental and economic benefits.¹¹ Additionally, multiple small and medium business associations in the UK have stated that they wish to be included in measures to reduce plastic bag usage due to the cost savings involved.¹²

While a number of large European and UK retailers have already implemented a voluntary levy on plastic bags, the efficacy of national bans and levies far exceeds that of voluntary measures, achieving reductions of over 90% in a number of countries.¹³

According to the European Commission's detailed Impact Assessment:¹⁴

- An outright ban would result in a net economic benefit in the EU of €899.5 million per year.
- A prevention target results in a lower but still significant net benefit of €739.8 million.
- A voluntary agreement has the least positive impact both environmentally

and economically, with an expected benefit of €478 million, only 53% of the revenue that could be generated through a ban.

- Net impacts on both producers and retailers are expected to be positive since 70% of single-use carrier bags are imported from outside the EU, and a ban or levy creates new opportunities for producers of multi-use bags and the opportunity for public authorities and retailers to generate revenues.

Opportunities through the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive

The original European Commission proposal¹⁵ to amend the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive is wholly flawed, as it lacks the two key provisions required to reduce consumption of plastic bags in the EU; an EU wide binding target and a mandatory pricing mechanism. It is up to MEPs to ensure these measures, which were supported in the Commission's own impact assessment, are adopted.

On April 17th 2014 the European Parliament will vote on amendments to Directive 94/62/EC on Packaging and Packaging Waste to reduce the consumption of lightweight plastic bags. EIA urges MEPs to adopt the report of the ENVI Committee, which contains a number of amendments designed to bring about a rapid and cost-effective reduction in the use of all single use carrier bags. Although lacking a commitment to a ban, it sets mandatory reduction targets which represent a good first step towards reducing the consumption of plastic single-use bags. EIA further urges MEPs to support any amendments which extend the requirements to charge for plastic bags to all retailers, not just those selling food, in order to maximise the environmental and economic benefits of which this Directive can achieve.

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⁶ Mudgal, S., Lyons, L., Bain, J. *et al.* (2011) Plastic Waste in the Environment – Revised Final Report for European Commission DG Environment. Bio Intelligence Service. Downloadable from <http://www.ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/studies/pdf/plastics.pdf>

⁷ European Commission's impact assessment SWD (2013) 444 .

⁸ Clapp, J., & Swanston, L. (2009). Doing away with plastic shopping bags: international patterns of norm emergence and policy implementation. *Environmental Politics*, 18, 315-332.

⁹ Statistics available at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/packaging/events.htm>

¹⁰ <http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2007/nov/13/environment.greenpolitics>

¹¹ House of Commons Environmental Audit Committee. Plastic bags; Eleventh Report of Session 2013-2014; including evidence submitted by Waitrose

(<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidencePdf/4321>) and Marks and Spencer

(http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/documents/how_wed_o_business/2013_defra_carrier_bags.pdf)

¹² Evidence submitted to the Environmental Audit Committee in 2013, by the Association of Convenience Stores

(<http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/WrittenEvidence.svc/EvidencePdf/4223>); British Retail Consortium

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