

RETHINK PLASTIC

EU agrees on new landmark plastic pellet regulation to reduce microplastic pollution, but remaining loopholes and delays likely to undermine overall impact

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As the clock struck midnight, after hours-long negotiations, the European Parliament, the Council and the European Commission struck a late-night agreement on the long-awaited EU Regulation to prevent plastic pellet losses to the environment, a major contributor to microplastic pollution. This decision comes in the wake of yet another pellet spill disaster in European waters off the English coast following the collision of two ships, starkly illustrating just how frequent pellet loss has become. Although the Rethink Plastic alliance regrets broad exemptions for small plastic pellet handling entities and significant quantities for thresholds, we welcome this ground-breaking regional approach to reducing this preventable source of pollution.

Positive steps welcomed, but delays and dilution may undermine impact

The deal preserves a clear 'zero pellet loss' objective and introduces a much-needed hierarchy of action: prevention is the top priority, followed by spill containment and, as a last resort, clean-up of pellet spills and losses. This, combined with mandatory measures to use appropriate packaging, equipment, training and infrastructure, marks a significant improvement over existing voluntary initiatives and reflects growing recognition that only proactive spill prevention can effectively reduce microplastic pollution.

The Regulation also follows a true supply chain approach, addressing spills and losses from all actors, EU and non-EU carriers, [across all stages](#), from production to conversion, transport, storage, cleaning and reprocessing.

Crucially, the maritime sector was included in the scope of the Regulation – a long-overdue inclusion following a string of shipping disasters. By legally binding previously voluntary International Maritime Organization (IMO) recommendations, the EU sets a powerful example for global leadership on pellet pollution at sea. However, the corresponding additional year for a transition period is an excessive and unjustified delay, given that many European vessels already follow these IMO recommendations.

The inclusion of mandatory independent audits for medium and large operators is a welcome step forward. Companies handling over 1,500 tonnes of plastic pellets per year must obtain a certificate of conformity issued by an accredited certifier. This introduces a much-needed, regular third-party check on compliance, moving beyond poor, [voluntary self-assessment and initiatives](#) like Operation Clean Sweep. However, the regulation failed to follow the official recommendation on the reduction of pellet loss that the OSPAR Regional Sea Convention made in 2021, which stated that "the certification system should apply to organisations of all sizes without exception" to ensure comprehensive prevention measures.

Importantly, the agreement lays a stronger foundation for transparency across the supply chain. Both EU and non-EU carriers will now be subject to mandatory reporting on plastic pellet losses, introducing a baseline for tracking compliance. While real-time reporting and independent verification are not yet required, the Regulation includes enhanced obligations to report any losses resulting in adverse effects on human health or the environment, alongside details on quantities lost, causes of loss and clean-up measures taken. Although

annual loss figures will still be based on operator estimates, these improvements mark a clear step forward from earlier drafts.

Key safeguards eroded during negotiations

Despite this progress, the final agreement exempts the majority of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) from independent oversight, even though SMEs make up the majority of the plastics supply chain, accounting for 98% in conversion and 97% in transport and storage. Instead of applying a risk- or quantity-based approach, the regulation exempts operators managing fewer than 1,500 tonnes per year per installation – a high threshold (75 billion pellets handled annually by a single facility).

More concerningly, even small companies managing over 1,500 tonnes per year will benefit from reduced obligations, including a one-off certification to be completed five years after the regulation comes into effect. This excludes significant numbers of industrial pellet handlers, risking widespread and unchecked compliance. Without regular oversight, this approach undermines the regulation’s core objective of comprehensive, supply chain-wide prevention.

With this regulation, the EU has taken a meaningful first step towards addressing pellet pollution. However, to truly deliver on the promise of a future with zero pellet loss, implementation must be swift, loopholes must be closed, and enforcement must be guaranteed. This regulation sets the foundation; now, it’s up to Member States, industry and civil society to ensure it works in practice.

Quotes:

- “This agreement represents a tremendous show of EU leadership in the global fight against microplastic pollution. The EU has recognised plastic pellets for what they are - a major source of microplastic pollution and a serious environmental threat. Binding prevention rules, supply chain obligations and maritime measures are major steps forward. However, loopholes, delays and arbitrary exemptions and thresholds risk stunting its impact. Now is the time to back bold words with bold action and ensure this law is delivered in practice.” **Amy Youngman**, Legal and Policy Specialist for the **Environmental Investigation Agency**

- “It is a huge relief to see EU decision-makers endorse a binding regulation with a broader scope to fight both land- and sea-based sources of pellet microplastic pollution. The Commission got it right by adopting a supply chain approach to ensure a uniform implementation of prevention and clean-up measures. The inclusion of maritime transport was a welcome addition, likely driven by recent container ship accidents, although with an unjustified 3 year delay. It is high time these binding rules replaced existing voluntary guidelines to ensure pellets are treated by operators as the hazardous pollutant they are, not just cargo”. **Frédérique Mongodin**, Senior Marine Litter Policy Officer with **Seas At Risk**.

- “Yesterday’s agreement happened while the [latest JRC report](#) highlights a worrying reality: despite the EU’s commitment to reduce microplastic pollution by 30% by 2030, emissions are actually increasing, including in the Ocean. With microplastics detected in human blood and organs, there is no room for half-measures. Applying lighter requirements to SMEs in the name of simplification could create a loophole that exempts them from accountability. It would mean citizens and SMEs from other sectors — as well as wastewater treatment operators — will continue to bear the costs of this pollution.” **Lucie Padovani**, Marine Litter Lobbying Officer for **Surfrider Foundation Europe**.

Notes to the Editor:

- Plastic production pellets, around five millimeters in size, are the building blocks of all larger plastics and constitute the third largest source of microplastic pollution in the EU. These pellets are known to accumulate, especially in the aquatic and marine environment, where they have significant negative impacts on wildlife and ecosystems.
- Plastic pellet pollution occurs across all stages of the supply chain in the EU ([Plastic Giants report & Plastic Pellet value chain visual](#)).
- As many as 184,290 tonnes of pellets are lost in Europe every year ([Impact assessment report from the European Commission](#)).
- The exponential expansion of the production of raw plastic materials since 2005 has resulted in increased waste generation and over 170 trillion plastic particles in the world's oceans. ([Tiny Plastic, Big Problem. The Case for Preventing Pellet Pollution.](#))
- The December 2023 [pellet spill on the Galician coast](#) showed firsthand how poor pellet transportation at sea can have catastrophic consequences. This, combined with mounting [research linking microplastic contamination to human health risks](#) and a [petition](#) supported by over 90,000 Europeans, activated parliamentarians, who voted 538 to 32 in favour of adopting binding rules, seizing a last opportunity to protect the planet and people from harmful and toxic pellet pollution.
- Just last month, a [pellet spill occurred off the coast](#) of the UK following a shipping collision, highlighting once again the urgent need for robust legal controls on pellet handling during maritime transport. Thousands of nurdles were washed ashore, polluting beaches and impacting wildlife and conservation areas. Without swift and comprehensive implementation, such environmental disasters are bound to repeat.

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