



Celebrating Animals | Confronting Cruelty Worldwide



Wildlife and Countryside



Tackling Single Use Plastics: A briefing for the Autumn Budget

October 2018

Wildlife and Countryside Link (Link) is the largest environment and wildlife coalition in England, bringing together 49 organisations to use their strong joint voice for the protection of nature. Our members campaign to conserve, enhance and access our landscapes, animals, plants, habitats, rivers and seas. Together we have the support of over eight million people in the UK and directly protect over 750,000 hectares of land and 800 miles of coastline.

The Treasury's consultation, 'Tackling the plastic problem' received 162,000 responses, which was record breaking. This highlights the great support for urgent action to tackle the environmental emergency that is plastic pollution.

This briefing sets out our proposed solutions to tackling the growing use of single-use plastics (SUPs), a major source of pollution. Solutions for mitigating plastic pollution must prioritise a reduction in the production and consumption of plastics, phasing out all but the safest and most essential SUPs.

Our key proposals to achieve this are:

- Implementing a combination of bans, taxes, charges and other economic incentives to stimulate reduction and incentivise reuse and more environmentally sound design. Government should also introduce a fully extended producer responsibility (EPR) system in the UK so producers and retailers cover the full end of life management costs for items they put onto the market. These measures are not mutually exclusive, but should be combined across the lifecycle of SUP items.
- Establish a general set of principles to include taxes, charges, bans or incentives, that aim to reduce single-use items at both production and point of consumption; reduce the number of polymers on the market; incentivise production and use of reusable and refillable packaging; encourage increased recycling rates and increase recycled content; prioritise recycling before down-cycling; and focus on easy and cost-effective recycling in the UK. In combination, these principles would have the effect of decreasing plastic pollution and incentivising and reviving domestic recycling infrastructure.

What's the problem?

Plastic pollution is now abundant in all the world's oceans and can be found throughout the water column - floating on the sea surface, accumulating in deep-sea trenches and sediments and sequestered in polar sea iceⁱ. Up to 12 million metric tonnes of plastic leak into the oceans each year, a figure that could double by 2025ⁱⁱ. To date, there is scientific evidence that this pollution impacts on some 800 speciesⁱⁱⁱ, through entanglement and ingestion, but the reality is likely to be much greater.

Plastic pollution is also prevalent in terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems. Approximately 80% of the plastic pollution found in marine ecosystems have been used or disposed of on land. Furthermore microplastic contamination of land is an estimated 4-32 time larger than in our oceans^{iv,v}. This is in part due to agricultural

practices such as spreading of sewage sludge, which is estimated to contribute 43,000-63,000 tonnes of microplastics annually to European farmlands.

Plastic pollution is also known to cause physical harm to human health as it has the potential to transfer toxic chemicals along the food chain to humans through consumption of fish and shellfish or leaching of chemicals from plastic products.

What does this have to do with the UK?

Current plastic waste, estimated at 5.2 million tonnes in 2018, is forecast to rise by a further 20% to around 6.3 million tonnes in 2030.^{vi} Packaging accounts for 67% of this^{vii} and UK supermarkets are estimated to be creating over 800,000 tonnes of plastic waste per year, accounting for over half of all annual UK household plastic waste.^{viii}

About 90% of the costs of dealing with plastic waste is borne by local authorities rather than the producers of plastic items^{ix}. This puts a significant burden on local authority budgets and affects spending on other key social and public issues. In many other EU countries, producers take on 90% - 100% of the costs of dealing with the end of life collection and disposal of their products. The prolific increase in the use of SUP packaging has also resulted in large amounts of plastic polluting the environment as litter due to four central factors: over-packaging; poor packaging design; an absence of effective collection systems; and consumers disposing of packaging incorrectly.

There is huge public concern about plastic pollution and a great appetite to put in place actions to stop the proliferation of plastics in the environment. Concerns about plastic pollution are also high on the agenda of governments around the world as well as the EU, United Nations, G7^x and World Economic Forum. If the UK is serious about being a world leader on ocean conservation then Government needs to build on this momentum to ensure effective policies are put into place to stop the plastic flow.

Proposals to tackle single-use plastics

Our key proposals for Government to phase-out, and eliminate single-use plastics are:

1. Establish legal definitions for plastics, based on the properties of the material, in particular its behaviour and impact in the environment, rather than the material, process of production or recyclability.
2. Develop a hierarchy of SUPs to prioritise interventions. We propose five categories:
 - *'Pointless plastics'* - limited social utility for which no alternatives are required and which can be phased out without significant behavioural or infrastructural change, e.g. vacuum packed pre-sliced fruit.
 - *'Replaceable plastics'* - perform a useful function, for which readily available alternatives exist that do not cause significant environmental or social harm e.g. coffee cups.
 - *'Problem plastics'* - non-recyclable, non-recyclable at reasonable cost and/or hazardous in the environment e.g. black plastic.
 - *'Harder to replace plastics'* - perform a valuable function, and are not readily substitutable without behavioural change, waste infrastructure change, food system change or product innovation, e.g. plastic packaging to keep food fresh over transportation distances.
 - *'Essential plastics'* - perform an essential function, where an alternative is unlikely to emerge in the medium term, and where increasing the cost of the item would result in social harm, e.g. pre-sterilised medical applications.
3. The Government should prioritise reduction in the first instance and prevent a one-for-one substitution of single-use plastic products with single-use products made from other

materials. Pointless SUP items do not need replacing, and reusable alternatives are often available.

4. The Government should introduce an immediate ban of the sale and distribution of
 - ‘pointless’ plastic items such as stirrers, sachets, cutlery, utensils and straws.
 - ‘problem’ plastic items such as PVC, black plastics and expanded polystyrene (EPS) containers.
5. The Government should introduce item specific taxes and reduction targets on all remaining SUPs and packaging (subject to exemptions for essential uses e.g. medical and disability use), in order to encourage a shift to reusable and lower impact alternatives, for example a tax on single-use cups at the point of sale, like charges for plastic bags.
6. The Government should introduce a tax on new plastics at the product formation stage to encourage greater recycled content in the remaining single-use plastic items brought to market. A tax on new plastics should work alongside mandatory targets for recycled content to reward producers that exceed targets.
7. All SUPs and other packaging types should be covered by a reformed EPR scheme that is transparent, provides full cost coverage of end of life costs, and is sufficiently ‘granular’ in attributing accurate end of life costs to specific types of materials. Fees should be sufficiently modulated in order to incentivise eco-design that prioritises reusable products first and recyclability second, to drive a continued reduction in the production and sale of SUPs. Taxes could also be used to encourage items to be designed for reuse and recyclability.
8. For all new taxes and charges, the Government should establish a monitoring and evaluation process, with the effectiveness of the tax/charge being reviewed periodically, with a view to increasing the level of the tax and/or expediting phase-outs if further declines in consumption are required.

We urge the Government to establish a legislative framework to end the release of plastic pollution into the environment. Such a framework should include immediate bans on ‘pointless’ and ‘problem’ plastics, reduction targets for single-use plastics and accompanying taxes, charges and other economic incentives to drive a reduction in production and consumption and a comprehensive strategy and regulatory measures to tackle sources of microplastic pollution.

For further information please contact:

Cecily Spelling
Marine Policy and Campaigns Manager
Wildlife and Countryside Link
cecily@wcl.org.uk | 020 7820 8600

References

-
- ⁱ Obbard, R., Sadri, S., Wong, Y., Khitun, A., Baker, I. & Thompson, R. 2014. Global warming releases microplastic legacy frozen in Arctic Sea ice. *Earth's Future*, 2, 315–320; Chiba et al., 2018. Human footprint in the abyss: 30 year records of deep sea plastic debris. *Marine Policy*, available [online](#)
- ⁱⁱ Jambeck *et al.* 2015. Plastic waste inputs from land into the ocean, *Science*, available [here](#).
- ⁱⁱⁱ CBD, 2016. Marine Debris: Understanding, Preventing and Mitigating the Significant Adverse Impacts on Marine and Coastal Biodiversity. Technical Series No.83. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Montreal, 78 pages. Available [here](#)
- ^{iv} Horton, A. A., Walton, A., Spurgeon, P. J., Lahive, E. and Svendsen, C. 2017. 'Microplastics in fresh water and terrestrial environments - evaluating the current understanding to identify the knowledge gaps and future research priorities', *Science of the Total Environment*. Available [here](#).
- ^v Machado, A., Kloas, W., Zarfl, C., Hempel, S. and Rilling, M. C. (2017) 'Microplastics as an emerging threat to terrestrial ecosystems', *Global Change Biology*. Available [here](#).
- ^{vi} WWF, 2018. Plastic consumption and waste management (Commissioned from Eunomia). Available online at: https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-03/WWF_Plastics_Consumption_Report_Final.pdf
- ^{vii} WWF, 2018. Plastic consumption and waste management (Commissioned from Eunomia). Available online at: https://www.wwf.org.uk/sites/default/files/2018-03/WWF_Plastics_Consumption_Report_Final.pdf
- ^{viii} <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/jan/17/nearly-1m-tonnes-every-year-supermarkets-shamed-for-plastic-packaging>
- ^{ix} http://ec.europa.eu/environment/waste/pdf/target_review/Guidance%20on%20EPR%20-%20Final%20Report.pdf
- ^x <https://g7.gc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/OceanPlasticsCharter.pdf>