

# European strategy on plastic waste in the environment

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**PURPOSE:** to launch a debate on how to improve the durability of plastic products throughout their life-cycle and to reduce the impact of plastics waste on the environment (Commission Green Paper).

**BACKGROUND:** global plastics production grew from 1.5 million tonnes (Mt) per annum in 1950 to 245 Mt in 2008, with 60 Mt in Europe alone. It is estimated (under a business as usual scenario) that **66.5 Mt of plastic will be placed on the EU market in 2020** and global plastic production could triple by 2050. In the European Union (EU 27), it is estimated that around 25 Mt of plastic waste was generated in 2008. Of this 12.1 Mt (48.7%) was landfilled while 12.8 Mt (51.3%) went to recovery, and **only 5.3 Mt (21.3%) was recycled**.

Once in the environment - particularly in the marine environment - plastic waste can persist for hundreds of years. Harm to the coastal and marine environment and to aquatic life follows from the **10 million tonnes of litter**, mostly plastic, which end up in the world's oceans and seas annually. Waste patches in the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans are estimated to be in the order of 100 Mt, about 80% of which is plastic.

**Plastic waste is not specifically addressed by EU legislation despite its growing environmental impact**. The Framework Directive on waste ([2008/98/EC](#)) sets a general recycling target for household waste which covers, among other materials, plastic waste. The need to continue efforts to reduce the incidence and impacts of plastic in the marine environment was particularly highlighted at the Rio+20 Summit.

**CONTENT:** the purpose of this Green Paper is to launch a broad reflection on **possible responses to the public policy challenges posed by plastic waste**.

The document highlights the opportunities that can arise from the improved management of plastic waste. It stresses, in particular, that enhanced recycling could contribute to the aims of the [Roadmap to a Resource Efficient Europe](#), adopted in 2011, and help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and imports of raw materials and fossil fuels.

Appropriately designed measures to recycle plastic can also improve competitiveness and create new economic activities and jobs.

## **The Green Paper should help to:**

- reassess the environmental and human health risk of plastic in products when they become waste, addressing their environmentally sound design, both functionally and chemically;
- open a reflection process on how to tackle the problem of uncontrolled disposal of plastic waste and marine litter;
- move forward the reflection on internalization of life-cycle impacts, from raw material extraction to the end of life phase, into the costs of plastic products.

## **Interested stakeholders are invited to submit their views on:**

- whether the legislation in force needs to be adapted and, if so, how, in order to manage plastic waste and to encourage its reuse, its recycling and its recovery over landfilling;

- the need to lay down specific plastic waste recycling targets and to take measures to avoid substandard recycling or the dumping of recyclable plastic waste exported to third countries;
- the effectiveness of voluntary action, in particular by producers and retailers, so as to achieve better resource use in the life cycle of plastic products;
- the possibility of introducing deposit and return or lease systems for specific categories of plastic products;
- the type of information to provide to consumers at the point of purchase of plastic products;
- changes to the chemical design of plastics to improve their recyclability;
- whether product design policy should tackle planned obsolescence of plastic products and aim at enhancing reuse and modular design in order to minimise plastic waste;
- the introduction of market-based instruments in order to more accurately reflect environmental costs from plastic production to final disposal;
- the opportunity to promote biodegradable plastics and to encourage the use of bioplastics;
- actions to be taken to reduce the volume of marine litter;
- the promotion, by the EU, of an international action to improve plastic waste management worldwide.

Contributions should reach the Commission not later than 7 June 2013. The follow-up to the Green Paper will be an integral part of the wide-ranging review of the existing waste legislation, which will be completed in 2014.