

Reducing the use of lightweight plastic carrier bags

Europeans use about 100 billion plastic carrier bags every year. Some of these are dropped as litter, ending up in the environment, where long-lasting plastics accumulate and harm wildlife. Most EU Member States have initiatives to curb the use of plastic bags. A proposed EU Directive aims to encourage and enable action by all Member States to reduce the use of lightweight plastic carrier bags.

Issue definition

An estimated 99 billion plastic carrier bags were placed on the EU market in 2010 – almost 200 bags for each EU citizen. Around 250-300 EU companies, with 15 000-20 000 employees, produce plastic carrier bags. The [annual consumption](#) of plastic bags varies widely between Member States (MS), from 20 bags per citizen in Luxembourg to over 400 in Bulgaria. Around 90% of these are lightweight bags, often used only once.

Littering of plastic bags is a widespread problem. Discarded bags can be especially harmful in the [marine environment](#), where animals may die after becoming entangled or mistaking them for food. Plastics particles can [concentrate toxic pollutants](#), which may harm organisms that ingest them, and enter the food chain.

Conventional plastics are commonly made from [by-products](#) of petroleum refining. They do not degrade and the plastic can last for hundreds of years while breaking up into smaller and smaller plastic fragments. Some bio-based plastics, made from biological materials such as starch, have the same properties.

There are different types of [degradable](#) plastics (photodegradable, compostable, oxo-biodegradable, hydro-biodegradable), which can be either petroleum-based or bio-based. They have differing properties with regard to:

- conditions under which they degrade (some require industrial composting plants)
- [degradation in the marine environment](#)
- time needed for degradation
- residues of degradation (micro-plastics, CO₂, methane ...)
- possibility of recycling, and impact on the recycling process
- [lifecycle](#) impacts (e.g. energy needed for production and transport, greenhouse gas emissions)

Current approaches and legislation

Arrangements for reducing the use of plastic bags vary widely [across MS](#). Denmark, France, Ireland and Bulgaria impose a tax on some plastic bags. England will introduce a tax in 2015, but exempt retailers with 250 or fewer workers. In Belgium, a plastics collection and recycling organisation collects fees charged to end-users. Retailers in Germany, Portugal, Hungary and the Netherlands voluntarily charge for plastic bags.

Charging consumers for plastic bags appears to be effective. Following the introduction of a tax in Ireland, annual consumption per person fell from 328 to 21 bags. In France, voluntary initiatives promoting reusable bags have reduced the consumption of lightweight carrier bags from 10.5 billion in 2002 to 800 million in 2013. Since reusable long-life bags were introduced in Luxembourg on a voluntary basis in 2004, waste from plastic bags has been reduced by around 85%.

Any ban of plastic bags is considered to be incompatible with EU rules concerning the free movement of goods, and with the current Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive ([94/62/EC](#)). Although the Directive has no specific provisions on plastic bags, Article 18 prohibits MS from imposing national bans on packaging that conforms with the provisions of the Directive.

Notwithstanding that, in 2011 Italy introduced a law that bans plastic bags unless they are biodegradable and compostable. The European Commission (EC) launched an investigation into the compatibility of the measure with EU law. Its investigation is focused on technical specifications notified by Italy in 2013.

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Commission proposal

In March 2011, [some MS in the Council](#) called on the EC to analyse possible regulatory action to curb the use of plastic bags. In a public [consultation](#) launched by the EC later that year, 78% of respondents favoured EU measures to reduce plastic bag use.

In November 2013, the EC proposed an [amendment to Directive 94/62/EC](#) that would require MS to “take measures to achieve a reduction in the consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags” (with a thickness of less than 50 microns, or 0.05 mm). Such measures may include “national reduction targets, economic instruments as well as marketing restrictions in derogation from Article 18”.

The EC's [impact assessment](#) sees added value from EU action in providing a common framework. It identifies overall savings and gains for producers, retailers and consumers from a policy combining a reduction target and charging for plastic bags. The EP's [initial appraisal](#) of the impact assessment finds the EC proposal – which includes neither a reduction target nor pricing – largely coherent with the impact assessment, but lacking some of its ambition.

European Parliament

On 10 March 2014, the Environment (ENVI) Committee (rapporteur Margrete Auken, Greens/EFA, Denmark) adopted a [report](#) with substantial amendments to the EC proposal. The amendments include mandatory charging for carrier bags in the food sector, and a recommendation to charge for bags in the non-food sector as well. Charges could be halved for bags that are both biodegradable and compostable. Within three years of its entry into force, MS would need to reduce their consumption by 50% of the EU average in 2010, and by 80% within five years. Very light bags (below 10 microns) used to wrap loose food would be exempt for five years, after which they would have to be replaced by bags of recycled paper or biodegradable and compostable bags. The vote in plenary is expected in April 2014.

Stakeholder views

The [European Economic and Social Committee](#) recommends setting a quantitative EU target, and letting each MS decide which measures are most suitable for meeting the target. In the [Council](#) meeting of 13 December 2013, some ministers spoke in favour of an EU-wide reduction target.

[European Environmental Bureau](#), an NGO, opposes special provisions for bio-degradable and very light-weight bags. It calls for binding reduction targets and obligatory measures, leading to a total ban by 2020.

[Eurocommerce](#), representing the commerce sector, favours consumer education and better recycling schemes, and rejects marketing restrictions. They call for analysis of the impact of substitutes, such as paper carrier bags which require more energy to manufacture and transport than plastic bags.

[Expra](#), representing the packaging recycling sector, favours voluntary agreements, in combination with education campaigns to change consumer behaviour. They warn that the internal market will suffer if MS are allowed to determine their own measures to reduce the consumption of plastic bags.

[PlasticsEurope](#), representing the plastics industry, agrees that charging for bags helps reduce littering, but opposes national bans and an EU-wide reduction target. They believe that littering can be addressed more effectively with EU-wide awareness campaigns. They call for equal treatment of all carrier bags, regardless of the material from which they are made.

[European Bioplastics](#) and the European Starch Industry Association propose an exemption for lightweight plastic carrier bags that are both compostable and partly bio-based. They point out that compostable bags can have an important function in the efficient and separate collection of compostable household waste.

In a letter to the EP's rapporteur, the [Oxo-Biodegradable Plastics Association](#) emphasises the environmental benefits of petroleum-based oxo-biodegradable plastics, notably that they degrade and biodegrade in the open environment leaving no harmful residues.

[EuPC](#), representing manufacturers of plastics products, supports the EC proposal, but not the ENVI Committee's amendments. They argue that biodegradable plastic bags degrade slowly (and not at all in the marine environment) and warn that the presence of degradable materials in plastics collected for recycling can impair the quality of products made from recycled plastics.

[Municipal Waste Europe](#) also argues that decomposable plastics disrupt the recycling process, and doubts the efficiency of addressing plastic bags separately from the broader problems of litter and plastic waste.