

Curbing the use of lightweight plastic carrier bags

Europeans use about 99 billion plastic carrier bags every year. Some of these are dropped as litter, ending up in the environment, where plastics accumulate and harm wildlife. An 'early second reading' trilogue agreement was reached on the Commission's proposal in November 2014. Council approved the text in March 2015; the vote in Parliament is scheduled for the April II plenary.

Plastic bags – a serious environmental problem

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, 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 to the [marine environment](#), where animals may die after becoming entangled or mistaking the bags for food. Plastic particles can concentrate toxic pollutants, which may harm organisms that ingest them, and enter the food chain. Many Member States have initiatives to curb the use of plastic bags, using a variety of approaches. Some national measures may be incompatible with EU legislation concerning the free movement of goods.

Commission proposal

In March 2011, [some Member States in the Council](#) called on the Commission to analyse possible regulatory action to curb the use of plastic bags. In a 2011 public [consultation](#) run by the Commission, 78% of respondents favoured EU measures to reduce plastic bag use. In November 2013, the Commission proposed an [amendment to the Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive](#) that would require Member States to take measures to reduce consumption of lightweight plastic carrier bags (less than 50 microns, or 0.05 mm, thick), which may include national reduction targets, economic instruments as well as marketing restrictions.

The Commission'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. Parliament's [initial appraisal](#) of the impact assessment finds the Commission proposal – which leaves decisions about reduction targets and pricing to the Member States – to be largely coherent with the impact assessment, but lacking some of its ambition.

European Parliament first reading

Parliament's [resolution of 16 April 2014](#) included targets for a 50% reduction (compared to 2010) in the consumption of lightweight plastic bags within three years, and an 80% reduction within five years. It called for mandatory charging for plastic bags in the food sector and a recommendation to charge in other sectors.

Trilogue agreement

A trilogue agreement reached in November 2014 would require Member States to take measures to reduce the annual per-capita consumption to 90 lightweight plastic carrier bags by the end of 2019, and to 40 by 2025, and/or ensure that such bags are not provided free of charge to consumers after December 2018. Member States' measures may be differentiated, based on the environmental impact, compostability, durability and intended use of the plastic bags, provided that the measures are proportionate and non-discriminatory. There is an exemption for very light bags, intended for the protection of fresh produce.

The agreed text was adopted as Council's [position](#) on 2 March 2015. Parliament's Environment Committee (rapporteur Margrete Auken, Greens/EFA, Denmark) approved the text on 31 March 2015, and the vote in plenary is scheduled for the April II session.